

Thakur Rajendra Singh
Ranbir

THE
**BARBARIANS OF ANCIENT
INDIA**

AND THE STORY OF THEIR
EXTERMINATION

BY
THAKUR RAJENDRA SINGH

M.R.A.S. (London) & M.U.P.H.S. (Allahabad) *M. P.*
Author of "Legends of Vikramaditya,"
"Great Wars of Ancient India," &c. *H. S. (Chabre)*

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(Tikra Estate, Sitapur)

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1540-1551-1857
To

The Gallant British, Indian and Allied Armies

FIGHTING, LIKE THE BANDED LEGIONS OF

RAMA AND SUGRIVA, AGAINST THE RUTHLESS RAKSHASAS OF

THE MODERN WORLD, IN A WAR AS RIGHTEOUS, AS

HOLY, AS GLORIOUS AS THAT CELEBRATED

IN THE IMPERISHABLE EPIC OF THE

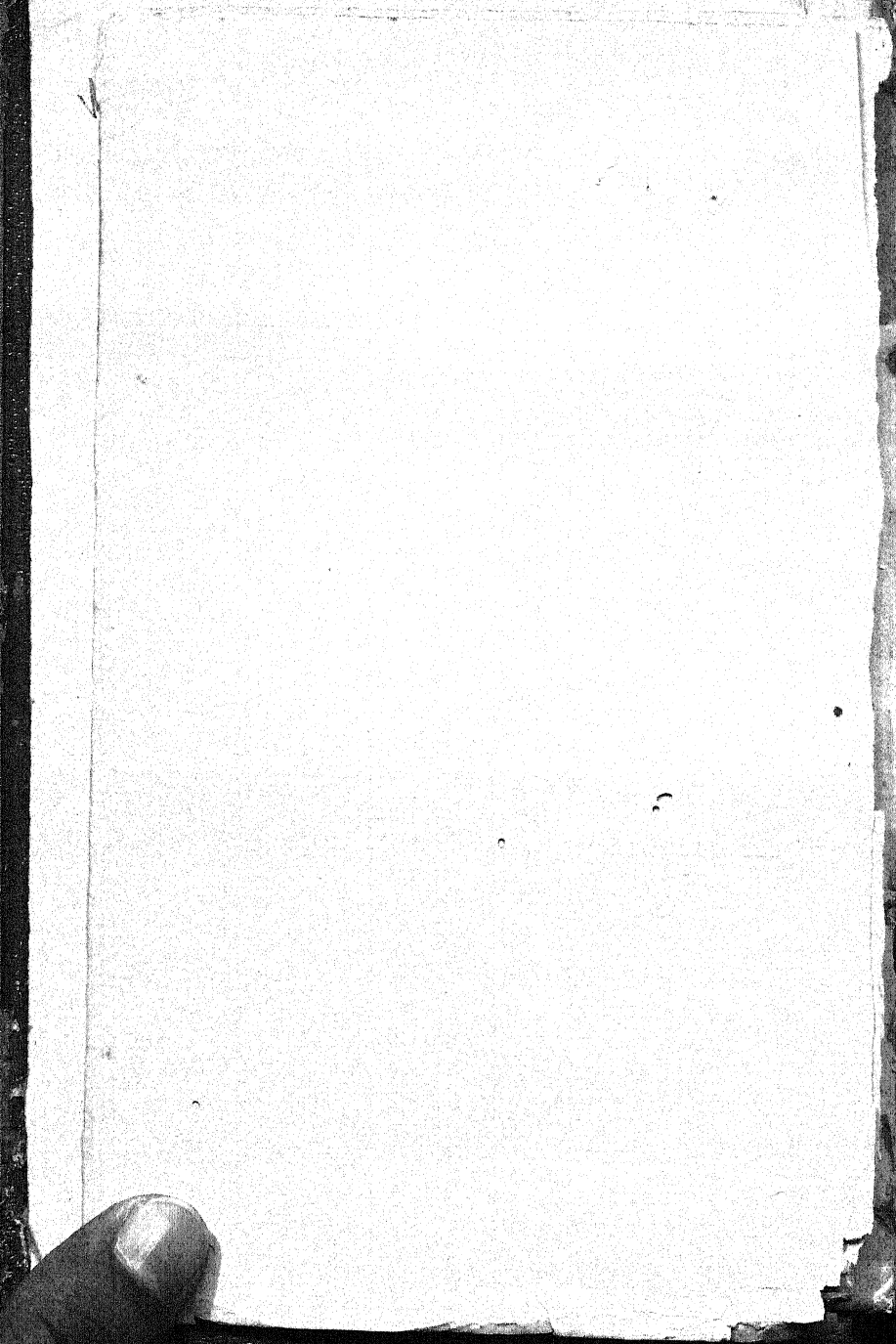
RAMAYANA

THIS LITTLE BOOK IS DEDICATED

AS A TOKEN OF HEARTFELT WISH FOR THE SUCCESS OF THEIR

ARMS

K. L. Munkh-pavla



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PREFACE.

HAVING presented before the public a brief prose narrative of the leading events of the Great War of Ancient India as described in the *Mahabharata*, I felt I should be slacking in my duty if I did not follow it up with a similar account of another, perhaps an earlier, great war recorded in the other Sanskrit epic, the *Ramayana*. These two epics constitute the brightest jewels in the whole literary treasure of ancient India. The one without the other would be incomplete, one-sided, partial,—much in the same way as the Old and New Testaments, which, though separate and distinct from each other, each perfect in itself, each forming a finished whole, are nevertheless thought of as one inseparable code of morality and religion comprised under one name, the Holy Bible. The two epics belong to two different ages of India's past ; they reflect a different order of civilization ;

they hold up before our eyes different ideals of life and character ; even their language and style is different. And yet the two are alike as embodying the life-story of heroes whom an adoring posterity has for many ages deified as incarnations of God. For the chief value of the *Mahabharata*, that which has given it a well-merited immortality, is that it is a record of the life of Krishna, as that of the *Ramayana* is derived from the fact of its being the biography of Rama : names that have inspired countless generations of Hindu people with hope in seasons of despair, with faith in moments of doubt, with beaming light in those hours of cheerless gloom when the poles of human value appear to be reversed—

“ And Time a maniac scattering dust
And Life a Fury slinging flame.”

The war celebrated in the *Ramayana* has nothing in common with that described in the *Mahabharata* except the name ‘war.’ In the *Mahabharata* the war forms the essence of the epic, the earlier events being only preliminaries to the war, and the subsequent events but the natural sequel of the eighteen days’ fighting. In the *Ramayana* the war is only an accident,

- evolved out of circumstances as little beyond calculation as its consequences were momentous.

Western scholars have as a rule placed the Pandu-Kuru war in an earlier age than the war in Lanka, thus dating the *Mahabharata* as the more ancient of the two epics. This is precisely the point on which Indian believers have differed ;—I say believers, and not critics, in the first place, because critics are critics all over the world, and in the next, because Indian ‘critics,’ being mostly modelled after the western pattern, have naturally learned to imbibe western views. Well, believers—those who have learned their lesson from the book of faith—have held the contrary opinion with regard to the comparative chronology of the two epics ; for they have believed from times immemorial that Rama and Krishna, heroes of the two epics, were incarnations of the Supreme Being who assumed mortal form in two successive ages of the world’s existence, respectively known as the *Treta* and the *Dwapara*. Hindu chroniclers have divided the entire tract of Time, from the dawn of creation to the final night of non-entity, into four *yugas* or ages, called the Satya Yuga, the Treta, the Dwapara, and the Kali. Each of these

they hold up before our eyes different ideals of life and character ; even their language and style is different. And yet the two are alike as embodying the life-story of heroes whom an adoring posterity has for many ages deified as incarnations of God. For the chief value of the *Mahabharata*, that which has given it a well-merited immortality, is that it is a record of the life of Krishna, as that of the *Ramayana* is derived from the fact of its being the biography of Rama : names that have inspired countless generations of Hindu people with hope in seasons of despair, with faith in moments of doubt, with beaming light in those hours of cheerless gloom when the poles of human value appear to be reversed—

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ages has had its own incarnation, except the first, in which none was needed, and the last, in which the time of the advent has not yet come. No special incarnation of God arose in the Satya Yuga, because that age was an age of unsullied purity, of untainted godliness, of sinless truth. Incarnations become inevitable only when the ways of man decline to bestialism, when faith becomes corrupt, and Sin stalks through the earth with the strides of a Colossus. The two middle ages—the *Treta* and the *Dwapara*—had each, towards their close, lapsed seriously from the tolerable standard of purity and righteousness, and direct divine intervention was therefore needed in each case to bring things back to their former condition. In the *Treta*, for instance, the Rakshasas began to harass the Aryans and assert the domination of brute force; the peaceful avocations of life were broken in upon by the hand of violence, and right and justice were obliterated by blood and blows. The result was the advent of Rama. In the *Dwapara*, similarly, highhandedness and tyranny, mutual jealousy and rancorous hate began to gnaw at the bonds that hold the human family together, and the whole fabric of society became disjointed and loose,

- until God had to re-appear in bodily shape, and save the world once more. This was the advent of Krishna.

So speaks the voice of faith in opposition to the verdict of criticism. The bulk of the Hindu people believe, logically or illogically, that Rama was an earlier incarnation than Krishna because the *Treta Yuga* was prior to the *Dwapara*. The learned critic, of course, argues ; and he bases his conclusions upon recondite researches that are as remote from common comprehension as the puzzle-brain problems of metempsychosis. The critics have their fling at the uncritical, and the uncritical bluffly retort by saying that there is hardly an absurdity which may not be dressed up as a theory, and hardly a theory which may not be supported by some sort of probable evidence, or proved by some kind of plausible reasoning. And I would much rather be a believer among believers than a convert to any new creed of Criticism. The main reason of this is that the aim of the present volume is popular, not scholarly. All honour to those noble scholars who have lighted the torch of learning in the obscurest corners of Indian literature, and who have shown to the

world what heaps of wealth lay dormant in unsuspected places. No such illumination is aimed at here ; there is no attempt at Oriental research, no trace of historical study, not a breath of the atmosphere of criticism. My only aim is to tell a story,—not a story of my own invention, but one that is already well-known,—and to tell it as far as possible in the author's own words, with just such degree of condensation and compression as would keep the narrative in an easy flow, and keep it also within the limits of an average book-lover's patience. I have also kept in view one other object,—of making the book suitable as a text-book in our secondary schools. I have often regretted that our boys should be obliged to feed their young imaginations on tales of Greek and Roman heroism, when similar and better stories drawn from the mythology of India would have been far more suited to call forth and stimulate those intellectual faculties which such reading is calculated to cultivate. Far be it from me to disparage those beautiful classical myths that shine through Milton's lofty dream and glitter and sparkle all through English poetry ; my sole contention is that they should form the second, not the first item of school studies.

The story of the *Ramayana* is only the life-story of its hero, Ram . There is not in the *Ramayana* any of those adventitious interpolations which mar the purity of the *Mahabharata* : it is a complete biography, with a beginning, middle, and end, and even a supplement to round off the whole. Rama was the eldest son of Dasaratha, King of Ayodhya. Born after much prayer and intercession in the old age of his father, he was the darling of the king, who loved him with more than a father's love, because for years the father's heart had been yearning for a child, and also because the birth of Rama was immediately followed by that of three other princes, born to the other Queens. The four princes were educated in a manner befitting the princes of that day, and Rama quickly developed a dash and dexterity in the use of arms that was deemed miraculous even in that age of miracles. He first won his spurs in an expedition sent to expel a horde of Rakshasas who were committing depredations in a forest adjoining the boundaries of the kingdom ; and from this enterprise he proceeded straight to Mithila to attend the *Swayamvara* of Sita, daughter of Janaka, king of Videha. There he successfully bent and broke a

formidable battle-bow, before which successive other suitors had quailed in terror ; and being the victor he was chosen by the princess as her lord. The wedding of Rama and Sita followed in due course, and the bridal party returned home to Ayodhya. King Dasaratha then proclaimed Rama as the Heir-apparent to the throne, and proposed to hand over the administration of the realm to him, preparatory to his own retirement to the jungle to pass his old age in prayer and meditation. All was ready for the joyous installation, when on the night preceding the happy ceremony, the youngest Queen, Kekayi, mother of the third prince, Bharata, obliged the feeble old king by coquettish threats and treachery to grant her the fulfilment of two undefined boons which she had erstwhile extorted from the king, and the definition and fulfilment of which she had deferred until a fit opportunity came. By one of these boons she now had Rama banished for fourteen years, and by the other she had her own son Bharata nominated heir-apparent in supersession of Rama. Rama meekly obeyed his father's mandate and cheerfully left for the jungle, accompanied, at their own request, by his wife Sita and by his brother Lakshmana. The old king

died just after, of a broken heart; and Bharata, refusing to grasp a sceptre come to his hand through a foul conspiracy, left home instantly to seek for Rama and to persuade him to come back to Ayodhya. The brothers met at Chitrakuta, where Rama was then in residence as an exile. But Rama declined to return home on any account until the full term of banishment was over, and Bharata had to wend his way back to Ayodhya, not, however, to assume the sceptre, but to place Rama's sandals on the empty throne, and himself to don the hermit's garb in the same way that his king had done in the forests. Finding Chitrakuta inconveniently near to his capital, Rama moved on into the deeper forest region of Dandaka, whence he migrated still further south, and finally built himself a hut in the romantic woodlands of Panchavati. It was there that Sita was carried away by Ravana, King of Lanka, who appeared before her in the guise of a mendicant, and failing to win her by the arts of flattery and seduction, resorted to force, and seating her in a swift chariot, drove her away to his stronghold, before Rama or Lakshmana had ever a chance to suspect foul play. All search proved fruitless; indeed what search

could a couple of homeless wanderers carry on through the mazes of a forest wide enough for a whole host to hide undiscovered for years? In the course of one of his wanderings in quest of the lost Sita, Rama met Sugriva, the crownless King of Kishkindha, who had been driven from his throne by a usurping brother, Bali. Rama formed an alliance with this Vanar king, Sugriva, and helped him in regaining his throne, and Sugriva in return, helped him with an army wherewith to declare war on Lanka for the purpose of winning back Sita. As soon as the season favoured, the army marched towards Ceylon, and crossing the straits at a point now called Rama's Bridge, invested the capital of Ravana. A bloody war followed, and ended in the fall of Ravana and the downfall of the Rakshasa kingdom.

Such is in brief the story of Rama's life, a story that has exercised a more powerful influence on Hindu life from age to age than any other story has ever done on the life of any other people on earth. Rama was indeed a king and a hero, but it is not his kingly pomp and splendour, nor the heroic achievements of his arms that appeal to the hearts of the Hindu people. On the con-

trary it is the trials and struggles, the sorrow and suffering, the banishment and wandering, the anguish and tears through which the hero passed that sink deep into the hearts of a people to whom these softer traits are more valuable than glory and triumph. Rama's life was a life consecrated to duty,—duty in all its spheres, domestic, social, and political. Rama is not only the ideal son, the ideal husband, the ideal brother, but also the ideal friend, the ideal ally, the ideal king,—the ideal all-round Man, a better type than whom the creative imagination of the Hindus could scarcely conceive in that *Treta* age, a type, therefore, which posterity has willingly elevated as an incarnation of God. The character of Sita is only the female counterpart of that of Rama. She is a princess and a queen; but in her case too it is not her queenly crown, but her crown of thorns that shines most radiantly. “Rama and Sita are the Hindu ideals of a Perfect Man and a Perfect Woman. Their truth under trials and temptations, their endurance under privations, and their devotion to duty under all vicissitudes of fortune, form the Hindu ideal of a Perfect Life.” I cannot resist quoting another short passage

from the Epilogue of that talented scholar, R. C. Dutt:—

“The ideal of life was joy and beauty and gladness in ancient Greece; the ideal of life was piety and endurance and devotion in ancient India. The tale of Helen was a tale of womanly beauty and loveliness which charmed the western world. The tale of Sita was a tale of womanly faith and self-abnegation which charmed and fascinated the Hindu world. Repeated trials bring out in brighter relief the unfaltering truth of Sita’s character; she goes to a second banishment in the woods with the same trust and devotion to her lord as before, and she returns once more and sinks into the bosom of her Mother Earth, true in death as she had been true in life. The creative imagination of the Hindus has conceived no loftier and holier character than Sita; the literature of the world has not produced a higher ideal of womanly love, womanly truth, and womanly devotion.”

Nor are Rama and Sita the only heroic characters in the epic: the poem is replete with lofty ideals. Lakshmana is the ideal younger brother; Kausalya is the ideal mother; even the crooked Kekayi is an ideal,—an ideal step-

mother. Among the lesser personages too—though it is difficult to distinguish a lesser and a greater where all is so sublime—there are characters so heroic that the Hindu heart, truly catholic in its love of heroism, has gladly elevated them into deified spirits, and pays adoring homage to their name and at their shrine to this day. One such personage is the monkey-chief, Hanu-mana, the faithful henchman of Sugriva, characterized by such staunch devotion to the person of Rama that, inspite of his being a non-Aryan “barbarian,” the grateful Hindu heart worships him as a god in every town and village of India, and has raised hundreds and hundreds of temples and shrines to his sacred memory throughout the length and breadth of Hindustan.

The *Ramayana* is a work of imperishable value not only as embodying lofty poetic ideals of human virtue, but as affording insight into the very fountain-head of those perennial streams that have for centuries and centuries been permeating and fertilising the soil of the Hindu character, and feeding and strengthening the invisible roots of some of those evergreen qualities which have been the very staple of Hindu life, which have saved the Hindu people from moral

starvation and decay during those ages of dearth and drought when the intellectual and spiritual activities of the people stood still like a sapless trunk, and the whole country was, in point of mental and religious culture, like an arid waste. And the same poem doth still, in its popular translations and adaptations, continue to provide moral and spiritual sustenance to the souls of those dusky millions to whom their own Scriptures are a sealed volume, because they are written in a language which has grown unfamiliar to their tongue through centuries of disuse. There is scarcely a Hindu, man, woman, or child, who does not possess a more intimate knowledge of the story of the *Ramayana*, perhaps only picked up from hearsay, than the most lettered critic can acquire from his tireless fingering of moth-eaten manuscripts. The story of Rama is one of the earliest tales listened to by the Hindu boy in the nursery ; a few years later, it becomes the subject of his study at school ; later on again, he tells the same story to his children and grandchildren ; and last, when earthly things have lost their value in his darkening eyes, it is the name of Rama that sustains his drooping spirits and accompanies him, sung in a chorus, to his

final resting-place. It is impossible, in terms of any current standards of measurement, to state the exact nature or degree of the influence that the *Ramayana* exercises over the minds of the Hindu people. One can do so perhaps only by pointing to the influence of the other epic, the *Mahabharata*. And as for the combined influence of the two, I think the late Mr. R. C. Dutt has certainly not overstated the truth when he says, "No single work except the Bible has such influence in affording moral instruction in Christian lands as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* in India."

It remains now to add a word in explanation of the title of this little book. In my last book, published last summer, I instituted a comparison between the Great War of Ancient India and the Great War of Modern Europe, and there can be no doubt that the comparison was not a mere freak of fancy, but a resemblance which the subsequent course of the war, and especially the recent exposure of some of the masked features of the Kaiser's character, has amply justified. In my present work the reader will find any number of suggestive hints of a similar comparison. I have called my book by the name of the

Barbarians of Ancient India, meaning by that designation the Rakshasa inhabitants of old Lanka. A study of their racial characteristics, as revealed in the *Ramayana*, will inevitably suggest to the mind of the reader, as it has done to mine, a comparison between those old people and the Germans of the present day, whom we cannot help thinking as the *Rakshasas of Modern Europe*. That single phrase will suggest to the mind of the Hindu more significant details with regard to the true character of the German people than the publication of any number of blue-books can do.

What a striking parallel there is between the German Kaiser and the Rakshasa King, Ravana ! Like Ravana, the Kaiser is, I understand, inhumanly tall. Like Ravana, who had an "army of sons and grandsons," the German King has scores of his brood harnessed to the yoke of war. Like Ravana, his policy is one of trickery and deceit, shunning open combats, and preferring to wage war from the secrecy of clouds above and the sea-waves below. Like Ravana too, he indulges in tall talk whenever his mouth is not gagged by fear, or whenever his breath is free from panting. It would be selfish if I were myself to

amplify this fruitful comparison and deprive the reader of the rapture he is bound to feel as at various steps of the following narrative a fresh point of resemblance flashes upon his mind. But let us be civil on this happy day of the New Year. 'Rakshasa' is a very old Hindu title, that has remained in abeyance since the days of the ruthless Ravana ; let the whole Hindu population of India join to-day in conferring it as a New Year's Honour upon that blood-thirsty barbarian, the Kaiser !

TIKRA ESTATE ;

R. S

Sitapur, January 1, 1916.

Krada Charan Chandra
Ranchi

CHAPTER I.

The Kingdom of Ayodhya.

IN days as far removed from the commencement of the Christian era as the Christian era itself is from our own times, there flourished a powerful state in Northern India in or about the site of what is now known by the name of Oudh. The ancient kingdom then bore the ancient name of Kosala ; but its modern name is a happy reminiscence of the name of its capital city Ayodhya,—‘ Oudh ’ being evidently a popular abbreviation of the classical ‘ Ayodhya.’ A town of this name still stands on its old foundations, and there can be no question that it is an actual survival of the ancient metropolis. The place has certainly undergone innumerable vicissitudes and transformations in the course of its uninterrupted existence through these countless ages ; it has renewed its streets and its dwellings, its temples and its towers ; it has sheltered a new race of inhabitants at each new epoch of its hoary history ; it has stood as a mute witness of deeds

of piety and of heroism ; but it has retained its bright immortal renown, all undimmed by the dust of revolving centuries. The origin and gradual ascendancy of this mighty kingdom are shrouded in those impenetrable mists that hang and hover over the earliest dawn of every ancient realm. The history of that prehistoric age presents a region of myth and fable through which the inquisitive explorer gropes his way, starting here and there as he comes across a scrap likely to furnish him a clue. And wherever written material is available, it is either pure poetry, which the most skilful paraphrase will hardly turn into history, or a work so deformed by interpolations that one scarcely knows what to call it—fish, fowl, or good red herring.

At the date of our story the kingdom of Kosala appears already to have attained the zenith of glory and grandeur. Its ruling king, Dasaratha, has earned for himself the honorable surname of “Chakravarti,” an imperial title signifying the holder’s suzerainty over a number of neighbouring chiefships and principalities. And when we remember that political suzerainty in India was in those days as difficult of achievement as ‘hegemony’ was among the old Greek

- states, we get a more adequate idea of the extent of Dasaratha's dominion.

The poet of the *Ramayana* has painted the character of Dasaratha in all the glowing colours that his pen could command ; but even after washing down the obviously overlaid tints there remains enough of dazzle and brilliance to create and confirm the impression that he was an exalted type of monarch, fit to be commemorated by both poet and people. It is but rarely that tradition preserves what history has allowed to perish, and it is rarer still to find tradition an history combining to perpetuate a noble name for thousands of years. But when this rarity is an actuality, the name is assuredly one deserving of immortality. It may be that the character of his son Rama has imparted added lustre to that of Dasaratha, whose name is reverently cherished because he was the father of the imperishable hero ; but it is more probable that Rama owed much of his success and glory to the fact of his being heir to a throne and a name brightened by Dasaratha. Be that as it may, there is no reason to disbelieve the substance of the lofty panegyrics which the poet of the epic has showered so lavishly upon Dasaratha.

No country in the world cherishes the memory of its benefactors so piously as India ; no country in the world has such a long list of noble names worthy of cherishing ; no country in the world has preserved its ancient heritage of heroic glory so faithfully. No country, again, has been ruled by such a long line of sovereigns ; their name is legion ; but of these millions how few are now remembered ! It is interesting to inquire what were those qualities that conduced to royal popularity and renown in that dawn of the world's history ; one way of doing so is by studying the characters of those monarchs whose names do still survive, not on the page of history, but on that of popular memory. One such monarch is Dasaratha, and of Dasaratha bards have sung in strains loftier than any inspired by mere gratitude can be. He was, in the favorite phrase of that age, a *Rajarishi*, or 'saintly sovereign,'—an appellation but grudgingly given to kings by a people in whom the nobler qualities of human nature still shone in their pristine purity. He was styled a saint in an age when every one was fit to bear that title, if judged by the present standard of saintliness. Pure as ice in private life, bountiful as the rains

in public charities, brave and invincible in war, Dasaratha combined in his person those lofty attributes that made up the old Hindu conception of an ideal king. A scion of the illustrious solar race, Dasaratha claimed kinship with the very gods ; but traces of that proud pedigree were more marked in his temperament and behaviour than in the pomp and splendour of his court. Patriotic, public-spirited, philanthropic,—these were but superficial traits in a character in which the sage and the saint were blended together in the happiest unison.

‘As is the king, so are the subjects,’—so says an Indian proverb, the application of which is considerably curtailed in extent in these days of constitutional monarchy. But in the patriarchal age, when kings were not merely rulers of the land but also parents to their people, the personal influence of the sovereign was the most potent of the multifarious forces that act and react in the shaping of that strange hotch-potch called the human character. We can thus feel no difficulty in believing the poet when he says that the people of Ayodhya were loyal to their king, peaceful, truthful, and faithful in private life, and imbued with a deep and fervent

piety that deeply tinged their whole conduct. Every household was like a hermitage ; the head of the family lived at peace with himself, with his neighbours, and with God. The people owned herds of cattle and granaries full of corn ; they carried on trade and commerce and pursued productive industries, and both of them yielded a surplus of wealth which they could with a clear conscience invest in articles of personal adornment. Cheats and swindlers, thieves and robbers, cut-throats and cut-purses were absolutely unknown anywhere even in that wealthy city. Nor did the possession of wealth breed pride or arrogance : there was hardly a distinction between the rich and the poor ; for that impassable cleavage which now divides property from poverty was not then that yawning chasm it has subsequently become. There were no hangers-on, no parasites, no drones, no dullards ; each man did his own allotted share of work in the commonwealth, and was recompensed for it by as ample a share of the necessities and comforts of life as he needed. There was no competition, no economic pressure, no struggle between capital and labour, or between aristocracy and democracy ; every detail of life was pure,

• well-ordered, holy. The Brahmins devoted themselves to the study of the Scriptures and to their priestly duties ; the Kshatriyas were well-versed in the profession of arms ; the Vaishyas confined themselves to matters of trade and commerce ; and the Sudras were contented with their hard-handed husbandry. There was consequently no overlapping of functions, no confusion of callings ; each order of society followed its ancestral occupation without a grudge or a groan.

The city itself was well-built on the banks of the Sarayu, and was situated, as we presume, in the heart of the empire. But we may just as well presume that the empires of those days were a bare wilderness as compared with the congested beehives of the modern world. Large tracts were still virgin forest, and immense areas lay untouched by the ploughshare. The only city worth the name,—the only place approximating a modern city—was the King's capital. It was there that the skilled artisan, the wealthy merchant, the rich banker, the ambitious courtier, and the most gifted bards and chroniclers were congregated. The most influential professional class were—not lawyers, but well-to-do mechanics,

who commanded a position in society and wielded an influence and authority akin to that now done by the proprietor of a large factory. The military classes also represented a fair percentage of the population, and they were treated with a consideration and deference proportionate to the services they rendered in protecting the people from the inroads of barbarian tribes dwelling within or without the empire. For the continent was not yet wholly cleared of savagery,—settlements of non-Aryan races still dotted the land, and menaced the peace of the Aryan kings, who were obliged to maintain large levies to quell their hostile incursions. In the case of Ayodhya these irruptions were invariably repelled with ease, so that not a brick of the city's ramparts, not a hair of the city's inhabitants had ever been touched by a hostile shaft. This fact it was which probably gave to the town its dreaded name of Ayodhya—'the impregnable in war.'

Such was the capital town of King Dasaratha. It was probably he who first built that town and made it his capital; it was certainly he who raised it to that height of glory and renown. He was a king who devoted his whole energies

to the welfare of his people, which he had secured by strenuous labour pursued unremittingly all through youth and all through manhood. And now the evening of life had approached ; failing strength and declining energies were a constant reminder of the grim grip of death whose approach the aging monarch felt to be hastening every day. He had fought, and he had conquered ; he had established an empire and ruled over it successfully for many years ; he had secured peace and prosperity at home, and won fame and renown abroad. What more was wanting to fill his cup of happiness to the brim ?

Yes ; there was a little matter only now beginning to weigh upon his heart. In the hey-day of youth and glory he had not felt the want, but now that the white gleam of declining day was settling upon his head, his mind became more and more melancholy at the thought of his being a childless monarch. Childlessness is to the Hindu one of the greatest curses that can ever fall to the lot of man, and to none does it come as a greater curse than to a crowned head. He looks not only for salvation in the next world through the agency of the son's pious offerings to his memory ; he hopes to transmit

his name and his throne to a line of monarchs sprung from his own blood and bearing his own titles. These hopes were cruelly denied to King Dasaratha. With all his conquering hosts, despite his horses and chariots, his gilded palaces and his smiling empire, Dasaratha was an unhappy man at heart. His heart withdrew itself more and more from attachment to these gewgaws of royalty, and began to yearn persistently after that peace which passeth understanding.

One day, as these depressing thoughts pressed upon his mind with unwonted force, the King summoned to his presence his chief minister, Sumantra, and the court priest, Vishwamitra, and to both he disburdened his heart as follows:—"I have got all that the most ambitious monarch could ever wish for, and more than that, I have the satisfaction to feel that during my whole career as prince and as king, there has not been a single passage or incident on which I should look back with the faintest tinge of regret or repentance. But while the past has always appeared a tract of unspotted brightness, the future is far from attractive. Yes, my dear friends, the morrow's outlook is anything but cheering. The days of youthful

- activity have departed, and a new phase of life has commenced with those first streaks of gray that herald the advent of a brighter dawn in another world. My past achievements in the field of kingship appear to me as though, like a heedless boy, I have spent my life in chasing butterflies, while that which alone would make life worth living has been so far wofully neglected. I have no cares for posterity : my life, however fruitful it might have been in its earlier course, is now about to lose its fertilising waters in a sandy wilderness."

A gush of tears welled forth from the royal eyes as these sad sentences faltered forth from Dasaratha's lips. The two ministers listened with speechless sympathy, and the king, after a short pause, went on : " There is nothing left for me to do but to betake myself to some lonely forest and pass the little remainder of my life in devout meditation."

Sumantra then replied : " My Liege,—what the Almighty pleaseth to do is always for the best, only our narrow vision precludes a view of the perfect whole, compassing only but broken fragments. Your past deeds have borne fruit, and will continue to bear fruit for ever. Nothing

is lost,—even the unfinished attains completion and reaches full fruition beyond our gaze ; the flower nipped by frost in the act of blossoming is not, as we think, destroyed,—it only blossoms in another region far from our ken, and diffuses its fragrance, enlivening the hearts of thousands, whose faces we do not see. Do not therefore mourn that your life has been a failure, simply because the Fates have so far denied a visible heir to your throne. You have heirs to your throne, not indeed of your flesh and blood, but those grateful millions who have been nourished by your bounteous hand and protected by your powerful arm, will cherish your name with the deepest reverence, and transmit it to posterity as an honoured heirloom.”

Sumantra's reply was like a courtier's consolation,—full of formal sympathy and commonplace wisdom, such as serve only to make the pangs of sorrow more poignant. Vishwamitra sat silent all the while, and when he spoke he spoke like a sage: “My beloved king,—there is no cause for sorrow. Why are you fretting your heart away like a silly girl? If you long for heirs to your throne, all you have got to do is to address proper prayers to the great Giver of

- all good ; for our holy writ sayeth that nothing is denied to him who truly asks. Perform the prescribed *yajna* or religious sacrifice, and the gods shall grant you an heir after your heart."

A ray of hope cast a faint gleam upon the King's clouded countenance. The holy sage Vishwamitra had ever been a man of his word, and his present word was supported by the weight of holy writ. Vishwamitra was not only the family priest, but also the spiritual preceptor of the King, who was bound in duty to obey his behests. So he at once gave orders to the officials of the court to make speedy preparations for the performance of the prescribed *yajna*, which came off in due course and was gone through with due ceremony.

Not long after the conclusion of the holy sacrifice, the three Queens were known to be in the family way, and the royal heart, withering from the pressure of childless cares, freshened under the breeze of new hopes. At last, four sons were born to these three Queens. The old King was now fully happy, rejoiced beyond his expectations ; for while he longed for a single son, his wishes had been granted to him in four-fold measure. Those who have had the

experience to suffer the yearnings of a father for issue, know what a height of happiness it is to gaze for the first time upon the face of one's first baby ; and those who have had this yearning for many years and had lost all hope of issue, are actually carried beyond themselves with joy. Such was the condition of Dasaratha when the glad tidings of the birth of his first prince, Rama, were brought to him. The old King could not restrain his tears ; in the sudden fit of ecstasy his power of speech was paralysed ; and it was some time before he could fully realise the exact situation. When he recovered himself, he lost no time in going into the interior apartments and feasting his eyes upon the peerless beauty of a swaddled babe pressed close to its mother's bosom. There was booming of guns from the ramparts of the royal city ; there was dancing and music in the courtyards and balconies of the royal palace ; elsewhere there was feasting of guests and visitors and the bestowal of alms and charity upon the needy ; while at night the housetops blazed with rows of lights that turned the darkness to day.

The little princes were duly named on the eleventh day after birth,—an event that is

- constructed into an important domestic ceremony among the Hindus to this day. The eldest prince, born of the senior queen, Kausalya, received the name of Rama ; the second queen, Sumitra, bore twins, and they were named Lakshmana and Satrughna ; the youngest and most favorite queen, Kekayi, had her son named Bharata. All the four princes were handsome, but Rama, with his peculiar olive-green complexion, was the most handsome of all. At the age of seven they began to receive instruction under a tutor, who taught them the *Vedas* and other religious works ; while at the same time they also received training in the use of arms and weapons, in chariot-driving, in hunting wild animals, and in other manly pastimes and exercises such as were thought fit for the sons of the nobility in those days. The princes took to their warlike exercises with a zest and a keenness that was extraordinary in boys of that age, and they acquired a mastery in the manipulation of military missiles that made them as proficient as warriors inured to steel.
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The four princes, though born of different mothers, loved one another with a depth and devotion scarcely found among young brothers

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dwelling under the same roof. There was never a quarrel, never a dispute, never an act of jealousy to mar the even smoothness of their love. The boys joined one another in work as well as in play with a harmony that was truly surprising. Such was their training that the four brothers felt like a single soul. But still Rama found himself drawn with special tenderness towards Lakshmana, while Bharata and Satrughna formed a second pair that loved to go together. It was an unaccountable instinct that made the twins, Lakshmana and Satrughna, attach themselves, not to each other, but to their other two brothers. Rama and Lakshmana were so fond of each other that neither felt happy without the other ; they learned their lessons together, played their games together, ate their meals together, and slept on the same bed. The attachment between Bharata and Satrughna was similar in kind, but weaker in degree.

Thus grew the princes day by day like the waxing moon, and whatever they did by way of work or sport, gladdened the heart of the aged King who loved his sons with a love made intense by the waiting of years, and who superintended every detail of their lives with a solicitude

uncommon in a king. He was excessively fond of all the boys, but it seemed as if his affections were more strongly centred on Rama than on any other of the princes, probably for this reason that Rama was the eldest and the heir-apparent to the throne.

CHAPTER II.

Rama receives his "Baptism of fire."

There were, as has already been said, within the empire of Ayodhya, large tracts of trackless forest that had never known the woodman's axe. One of these extensive jungles was situated not far from the confines of the capital, and it was believed to be the home of wild animals and the abode of a band of pious ascetics. These latter lived there in retirement, and spent their time in prayer and penance, undisturbed by the noises of the busy world. One night when the face of the heavens was heavily veiled with clouds, and rain was falling in a light drizzle, the anchorites saw a flare of light in the thickness of the woods. They wondered at the strange sight,—it was quite an unusual thing for lights to appear in that unfrequented forest. Soon the lights seemed to travel in their direction, and it looked as though a party of robbers were on their march to attack some unwary travellers. What had the poor anchorites to fear from robbers and bandits?

And so they thought no more of the approaching robbers, and turned their minds again to meditation. It soon appeared that they were not robbers,—they looked more like mis-shapen monsters than mortal men. The grisly band approached nearer and nearer, and when they reached the spot where the anchorites were seated together round their fire, they also took their seats at the same spot, and began to roast some raw flesh that they carried in their bags. The smell of roasted meat was abominable to the senses of the devotees, whose only food consisted of forest herbs, root and fruit. Then followed a course of indulgence in drink, and kegs of wine were opened and emptied with amazing rapidity.

What succeeded had better be left to the imagination. The innocent devotees were grossly insulted ; taunts and blasphemies were freely flung at them. All this they bore most meekly ; so also did they endure the worse outrage of being pelted with the bones of the meat they devoured. This was more than even a poor recluse could bear, but still the anchorites, instead of meeting this outrage with force, betook themselves to the hermitage of Vishwamitra, and entreated him to move the King Dasaratha on their behalf.

"For," said they, "these ruthless ruffians have begun to extend their wanderings beyond the bounds of their own forest. We cannot suffer this molestation on our peaceful meditations."

Vishwamitra promised to represent their grievance to the King, and early next morning he started for Ayodhya. Working himself up to a high pitch of indignation, Vishwamitra burst upon the royal presence, and in his own bluff manner spoke out, "Is this the way you discharge your kingly duties? It seems that you are growing too old to rule your realm as firmly as you did before."

"Why? What is the matter?" asked the King; "what has roused you up to this passion and rage? Let me assure you that not till my dying day will I once be found slow or slack where duty is concerned; and let this assurance suffice to cool down your temper."

The angry outburst with which the sage addressed the King was really not a symptom of rage, but a characteristic manner peculiar to some of the most renowned sages of ancient India. The name of the dreaded Durvasa will readily suggest itself in this connection. The fortunate thing was that these sages were as quickly

incensed to wrath as softened by flattery ; and thus it was that Dasaratha's warm assurance had the effect of instantly pacifying the wrathful sage, who then proceeded to tell the King how a band of turbulent ruffians was in the habit of trespassing upon the peace of the holy hermits who dwelt in the neighbouring forest. These dark demons committed all sorts of outrage in the outlying parts of the empire, and, not content with pillage and murder in the inhabited tracts, they even molested innocent anchorites in the depths of the jungle. The triumphs of peace, achieved by years of patient toil and thought, were shattered in a moment by these barbarian hordes.

The King listened to Vishwamitra's report with manifest concern. The thought of the common weal was the uppermost thought of his mind. Whenever he heard of a wrong, his heart knew no rest until he had redressed it, and hence he was more grieved than offended at the reproachful words flung at him by Vishwamitra, to whom he replied as follows :—"Holy father,—I am ready to do anything to rid the country of these pests. Command me, and my services are at your absolute disposal."

" Since you have given your royal word to

do my bidding," said Vishwamitra, "I will ask you to send your eldest son, Rama, to put down these turbulent hordes that infest the forest regions, and disturb devout devotees in the discharge of their sacred duties."

The aged monarch was thunderstruck. In his eager desire to redress a rueful wrong, he had been led to make a rather rash promise. How could he send his youthful son to quell a horde of murderous marauders? How could he risk the safety of his eldest-born, vouchsafed to him by the gods after years of vain longing? For a boy of such a tender age to fight against dark demons, meant certain death. On the one hand he feared the safety of his son, on the other, he dreaded the curse of the sage, which his irascible temper made absolutely certain in case he refused to do what he had promised. The poor King was fixed on the horns of an awkward dilemma. At length, with much hesitation and frequent pauses, he said, "Far be it from me to withstand your holy will and pleasure; but your holiness will perceive that my Rama is still of very tender age, and by no means a proper person to march against a band of fiendish infidels. The boy is scarcely sixteen

years of age, and has never even beheld a scene of bloodshed. How can he crush a brood of devils? I shall instead place the whole of my vast army at your disposal, and order their commander to lose no time in attacking those enemies of the empire and making the whole race of them utterly extinct. I am willing to exert my own aged limbs in the defence of our religion. Rama is yet a child, and may be easily circumvented by the guile and treachery of these practised miscreants. Moreover he has not yet acquired sufficient proficiency in the use of arms to be of much avail in a contest of this gravity. Rama is my eldest boy, and hence dearest to my heart. I therefore implore you to have mercy on me, and spare me from the pain of sending away my Rama to the forests to expel a swarm of banditti. I am ready to go with you this instant myself, if so you desire."

Even this most submissive appeal did not save the King from the wrath of the Rishi. Vishwamitra fell into a towering rage, and, in a tone dripping with anger, said, "You are false to your own word, O King. You gave me a distinct pledge that you would do as I demanded, and here you are, ready to break your plighted

word, as though it was not the promise of a king, but the oath of a drunkard. I am going back to my hermitage this moment, for I do not wish to have anything to do with a king who breaks his own word."

The King was in an agony of perplexity. A bitter struggle was going on in his heart between fatherly affection and regard for his own honour. There was a third feeling mixed up with the other two,—dread of the curse that the sage might in his bitterness pronounce upon that very son whom the father was anxious to guard from all harm. He knew not what to think or what to say, and he stared at the face of the offended Rishi with a vacant gaze.

Vasishtha came to the King's rescue, and interposed on behalf of the sage: "You know that Vishwamitra is himself a doughty warrior, and if you send Rama with him there can be no fear of his safety, for the prince will be well looked after. Moreover, Rama, though only sixteen years of age, is already a full-fledged warrior,—a warrior before his age, beyond his age; and I have not the least doubt that he will himself welcome such an opportunity of showing his prowess in actual war; for, as you know full

well, a true warrior soon gets sick of mere manœuvring."

Dasaratha had nothing for it but to yield. And so Rama—and his brother Lakshmana too, for the latter refused to be left behind—proceeded to the forest with Saint Vishwamitra. When taking leave of the King, the princes were advised by their father never to offend the holy sage and to carry out his behests faithfully ; for he feared that the boys might in their youthful ardour exceed the instructions of the sage, and thus fall into some unknown peril. The party marched slowly on their way, and rested for that night in a hermitage near the confluence of the Sarayu with the Ganges. Next morning they crossed the Ganges and reached the skirts of that forest where a demon princess had her abode, and Rama's first taste of war was to attack her den and slay her. The party then marched on, and reached the hermitage of Vishwamitra, where they saw a party of holy sages assembled to celebrate a great sacrifice. The demons were hanging about the sacrificial site, throwing petty obstacles, causing vexatious interruptions, pilfering or polluting the articles of the *yajna*, and otherwise molesting the devotees. The princes

at once hurled their shafts in every direction and dispersed the fiends, wounding some, slaying others, and putting to flight the rest. The whole affair was as easy as driving away a swarm of flies ; for the demons were at best a rabble rout who could not stand a moment before the disciplined might of the well-trained princes, armed with the latest weapons of offence and defence.

Thus did Rama receive what may be called his "baptism of fire," and he came out of this experience not only a better warrior, but with a longing for fresh deeds of valour. The dark demons of the forest whom he had driven and dispersed were no doubt some of the non-Aryan inhabitants of Lanka, who had emigrated to the mainland of India and made settlements in the southern portion of the peninsula, whence they carried on their depredations into all parts of the country, harrassing the territories even of distant Ayodhya.

Having fulfilled the task for which they had been brought by the sage, the princes solicited permission to leave for home. But Vishwamitra and the other sages who were engaged in the celebration of the *yajna* were about to start for

Mithila, capital of the kingdom of Videha, situated in what is now called North Behar. This kingdom was another of the powerful states of ancient India, and was at this date ruled by King Janaka, another of those ideal kings whom India will never forget. In point of learning and piety, he even excelled the best of Brahman sages, and his name still figures conspicuously in many of the religious books of the Hindus. Janaka was about to hold a great *yajna* at Mithila, and to this he had invited all the great sages of the country, including Vishwamitra. The *yajna* was to be followed by the *Swayamvara* of his daughter Sita ; and Vishwamitra now wished that the young princes should accompany him to Mithila and witness the two ceremonies.

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CHAPTER III.

The Wedding-Assembly of Sita.

Rama and Lakshmana gladly consented to accompany Vishwamitra to Mithila. They had been commanded by their father never to disobey the holy sage, and in obedience to that paternal mandate they were now on their way to the court of King Janaka. The monarch of Videha welcomed the party with open arms,—the two princes in particular, because he was not expecting them. Nor did Janaka at first sight know who they were ; but when Vishwamitra told him that they were the sons of the great Raja Dasaratha of Kosala, his heart was rejoiced indeed, especially since the very first glance of them had evoked a tenderness of feeling from his heart which at the time he felt to be unaccountable. The more he looked at Rama's face the more was his heart drawn towards him ; and the prince's handsome features, dignified mien, courageous and manly bearing, and finished courtesy, coupled with his royal descent, created

a secret wish that his daughter might wed this imperial prince. But there was a hard condition attaching to his daughter's marriage,—a condition that he himself had prescribed, published, and proclaimed,—and the fulfilment of that condition by Rama lay no more in his power than his daughter's choice of the same prince as her accepted suitor. Thus there were two obstacles in the way of his wish ; but yet the wish was such a flattering one that the fond father was unwilling to relinquish it.

When Rama and his party reached Mithila, preparations for the *Swayamvara* of Sita were already complete. The great hall of the palace had been tastefully decorated, and seats had been arranged along the wall for the numerous guests and visitors, according to their rank and birth. An enormous bow was placed in the open space in the centre, and the condition imposed on the suitors of Sita was that the winner of the princess should bend and string this mighty bow. The actual ceremony was to come off on the next day, and Rama thus got an opportunity of taking a stroll round the city and comparing it with his own capital. No doubt he picked up a good many views and impressions that must

have been of great use to him later in life when he himself became King of Ayodhya. But just now it was nothing more than sight-seeing, and Rama seemed to be quite pleased with all he saw.

Next morning, Rama made up his mind to take a turn in the royal gardens with the double object of enjoying himself and of plucking flowers for Vishwamitra's daily worship. It so happened that just at that moment Sita, too, with some of her maids, came into the garden for a morning stroll. By the merest accident the eyes of Rama and Sita met; their eyes met and instantly Sita's eyelids dropped; but with the dropping of her eyelids a picture of Rama's beauty was engraven upon her heart. Her bosom fluttered with feelings she had never felt before; her breast heaved with a joy unlike all others she had ever tasted. The next moment, however, a still stronger feeling of depression succeeded that joy, but the next moment again the joy returned; and in this fantastic manner the two feelings of elation and dejection kept playing in her heart, with the result that she hurried back from the garden indoors. Rama's mental state was different only in degree, the

difference being due to the difference in sex. But yet his interest in observing the beauty of the garden flagged and faded ; another and a greater beauty had taken complete possession of his heart. He quickly finished his work of gathering flowers and hastened back to Vishwamitra's camp, but was henceforth unusually reticent, whereas before this he had pelted the sage with all manner of questions relating to the manners and customs of the new country in which he had arrived.

The morning wore to evening ; but from the hour of noon, guests and visitors began to stream into the palace-hall, and to occupy the seats allotted to them by the heralds. Long before the auspicious moment fixed for the actual ceremony of bending the bow, the hall was crowded from end to end. There was a blaze of finery and jewellery such as, in the language of hyperbole, would be compared to the splendours of the starry firmament. On a high throne, at the upper end of the hall, sat Raja Janaka, surrounded by the dignitaries of his court. The great bow, which was claimed to have descended from the gods, was placed in the centre of the hall.

The conditions of the marriage were duly proclaimed to the assembly by the royal heralds, who also accorded a formal welcome to each princely suitor and a formal invitation to make the trial of bending the bow. Most of the assembled chiefs and princes took it to be a simple thing to lift up and string the bow; they thought it could be as easily done as said. Only a few of the suitors could fully realise the severity of the test, and these were the elderly sort or those among the nobility who were what might be termed "marriage hunters." They alone quaked in their hearts, and withdrew from the trial with a wise anticipation of the result. Others stepped up boldly to where the wondrous bow was lying, and came back in an instant, repulsed by the mere sight of the huge weapon. Others again touched the bow with a doubtful air, and it appeared from their manner as if they were testing whether the bow was hot or cold. A few went so far as to heave one end of the monster bow, but there they stopped, and prudently pocketed their shame and returned to their row. Disgrace, disappointment, and discomfiture were visible on every face, and feelings corresponding to these looks rankled invisibly

in every heart. The princely maiden was no more sorry for these defeated suitors than her royal father. Rama's turn at the trial was, it seems, fixed somewhere towards the end of the list; and when he advanced from his seat towards the centre of the hall there was a suppressed murmur of mixed whispers—some commenting on his youthfulness, others commending his masculine graces, some doubting his capacity, others wishing him success. There was a courageousness in his bearing and a confidence in his looks that impressed the spectators as the genuine stamp of a hero. There was a breathless silence, caused by intense watching and suspense, as Rama stood before the prostrate bow, and pondered a moment in his heart. The next moment he had grasped the central handle of the bow in his left hand, and was feeling its weight, while all eyes were riveted on him in expectation and wonder. With a graceful bend of his powerful arm did Rama then bend the God-gifted bow, and fasten the cord around the loose end successfully, while thunders of applause roared from the spectators in peal upon peal. Not content with only stringing the bow, Rama pressed the upper end still further; and lo! the

invincible weapon broke in two like a child's toy,—and then the plaudits of the spectators smote with deafening intensity and seemed to shake the great hall to its very foundations.

It was some moments before the cheering came to a close. The excitement of the occasion was so convulsive that hoary-headed chiefs behaved like hysteric schoolboys, and passion ran uncontrolled through the whole august assemblage. Rama stepped back to his seat, and seemed to be lost in thought. He marked not the wild shouts of joy that rose from the crowds, nor seemed to heed the more restrained congratulations of his peers. His heart seemed elsewhere ; and it was only when the blushing bride approached with the bridal garland, that he seemed to start back to a consciousness of his surroundings.

The feelings of Janaka were no less agonising than those of Rama. Each time a lordly suitor stepped up to the bow, his heart beat with the wildest agitation ; but when the same suitor came back disappointed to his seat, he felt calm again for a few moments. For, as has already been stated, it was Rama, and Rama alone, whom in his heart of hearts he wished to have as

son-in-law. Some of the noblemen who offered themselves as suitors were simply abhorrent to him ; but it was an open competition, and, except on grounds of legal disability or incestuous proximity of blood, he had no power of rejecting a candidate for personal aversion. He could find consolation in prayer alone, and to prayer he resorted. And it was prayer that sustained him in his repeated agonies of suspense, and retained him with dignity at the head of that dignified assembly. Inwardly he was on the rack, but outwardly not a muscle of his face moved, and he seemed to watch the proceedings with the normal solicitude of a father.

Poor Sita was apparently in a worse plight. A modest maiden, exposed to the gaze of a big multitude, and awaiting the decision of her matrimonial fate on the result of what was at best a game of hazard,—this was a situation enough to make the stoutest female heart burst its bonds. But, as a matter of fact, Sita was comparatively insensible to her unamiable surroundings ; all sense, all thought, all feeling had been fused together in her warm heart in one paramount emotion of Love. The long row of faces lining the walls of the magnificent hall

had lost all distinction of form and features, and in each she only beheld an image of the same dear face that was depicted upon her heart. Her eyes were neither wandering round the hall, nor following the suitors, as they walked up and down to the bow, but seemed to be drawn inwards and gazing at the beauty that had suddenly burst upon her view during her morning stroll in the garden. That same beauty was now again present before her eyes, but for some reasons best known to herself, she seemed to be contented with the image, and to neglect the reality.

Now only, when the shouts of triumph woke her up from her reverie, did the reality become a true reality to her. Rama was now her own Rama, and, with light gay steps bespeaking a disburdened heart, did she allow herself to be led by her maids to where the victorious prince was sitting. With a most becoming grace and dignity she cast the bridal garland around the hero's neck, while a third peal of tumultuous acclamations rose to the heavens, and mingled with the booming of artillery on the ramparts so harmoniously that it was impossible to distinguish the one from the other.

The *Swayamvara* was now over,—and over

just in the way everyone would have desired, except the chagrined suitors, some of whom left post-haste for their homes, pretending sickness or urgent business, while others stayed on to witness the nuptials which were soon to follow. A messenger was despatched to Ayodhya on horseback to communicate the happy tidings of Rama's victory at the *Swayamvara*, and to invite King Dasaratha and the royal suite to preside at the celebration of the royal wedding. Meanwhile festivities were kept up in full swing both in the royal palace and in every private home throughout the capital,—in fact, throughout the kingdom of Videha.

CHAPTER IV.

The Marriage of Rama and Sita.

The envoys from Mithila reached Ayodhya in three days, and were duly ushered into the presence of Raja Dasaratha, to whom they delivered their message with the amplest fullness of detail and the gentlest accents of courtesy: "Greetings unto Your mighty Majesty, greetings unto the peers and people of your far-famed empire, do we bring from our Sovereign Lord, the King of Videha, Raja Janaka of the noblest lineage and the highest renown. Be it further known unto you that our monarch had issued a proclamation to the effect that whoever would bend his mighty bow of war should win his daughter Sita, and that, in pursuance of this public invitation many a princely suitor came from far and near to test his fortune by a trial of strength. We are further commanded to state that among these suitors Your Majesty's sons, Rama and Lakshmana, accompanied by Saint Vishwamitra, also

- came, and, by the grace of God and the will of the kindly Fates, Prince Rama successfully strung and snapped the invincible bow, which none of the other claimants could even so much as bend an inch ; that Rama has thus been declared the winner of the princess Sita, who has set a seal on her choice by placing the bridal garland around his victorious neck ; and that Your Majesty, together with the lords temporal and spiritual of your realm, are hereby humbly invited to Mithila's city to grace the happy nuptials of the princely couple at as early a date as convenient."

Dasaratha was overjoyed at this message. Since his two sons had left home with Vishwamitra, he had heard nothing from them, or about them ; and his heart, sickened by weary waiting, had begun to entertain the worst misgivings about their safety. Now suddenly he came to learn that they were not only safe and well, but had achieved two signal triumphs,—one in overcoming the Rakshasa hordes that infested the neighbourhood of Vishwamitra's hermitage,—the other, in bending and breaking a massive battle-bow, which no other prince could so much as lift or heave. In his ecstasy he gave orders

for preparations to be at once made for a journey to Mithila.

It was with a right royal retinue that Dasaratha started for Mithila. Wagons laden with gold and gems ; herds of elephants, all richly caparisoned ; fleets of noble chargers ridden by noble horsemen ; state chariots resplendent with the gaudiest upholstery ; squadrons of horse and foot soldiers arrayed in the brightest uniforms,—these formed the marriage procession, headed by the venerable figure of the aged monarch, supported on each hand by a prince of the blood,—Bharata and Satrugna, and attended by the four learned luminaries of the court, Vasishtha, Vamadeva, Kasyapa and Jabali.

The royal procession were received at the palace-gates by King Jañaka himself. The meeting of the two monarchs was cordial in the extreme ; there was not a touch of that picturesque diplomacy which often makes such meetings a mere pantomime, nor was there any alloy of that formal courtesy which in royal mouths loses what little significance it possesses on humbler lips. Said Janaka :

“ Welcome, welcome, my royal brother, and shed some of your infinite grace on my house.

- Welcome to my home, O pride of Raghu's race. On behalf of the peers and people of Mithila, do I extend my welcome to every member of your retinue. The bright effulgence of your saintly name and the transcendent glory of your royal renown shall henceforth lend their lustre to my humble house, about to be allied to yours by the loving bonds of matrimony."

Dasaratha replied: "Gifts betoken the bounty of the giver, and it is your righteous renown and kingly virtues that lend an added lustre to the glorious gift of matrimonial alliance with which you have been pleased to honour my humble house."

The marriage ceremonies came off on the next day: ~~it~~ it would only overburden the narrative to enter into details of the multifarious little rites performed in that connection. Timely negotiations had at the same time settled the marriage of the three remaining sons of Dasaratha; and while Rama was wedded to Sita, the latter's younger sister, Urmila, was given away to Lakshmana, and Janaka's two nieces were married to Bharata and Satrughna respectively. It was a quadrangular wedding, and the ceremonies connected therewith were accordingly of fourfold

pomp and splendour. Vasishtha officiated as the chief priest, and pronounced the holy incantations appropriate to each detail of the ceremony. The concluding rite of circumambulating the altar was the most brilliant function of a series of ceremonies that seemed to vie with one another in scenic display ; and as each married couple, dressed in the gorgeous attire of princely weddings, stepped round the altar blazing with flowers, it seemed as if the earth could not show grander sight to dazzle the eyes of mortal man.

The bridegroom party were now ready to return to Ayodhya, with the brides and their maids. They received a magnificent send-off from Mithila's monarch, who accompanied the party for some distance, and did all that could be done to make the journey safe and comfortable.

On their way back to Ayodhya, the marriage party escaped from a very nasty accident. As they were passing through a forest, a gigantic warrior wielding a terrible battle-axe suddenly appeared before them, shouting, "Where is that villain who has broken the bow of my preceptor ? By so doing he has only knocked at the door of death."

A faint shudder passed through the whole

party, as it was obvious that the tall giant was especially seeking Rama. Later on, it was discovered that the giant was no other than Parasurama, a Brahman who had acquired invincible prowess by years of prayer and penance, and who was dreaded by the Kshattriyas as their most fatal foe, in that he had repeatedly made a wholesale slaughter of Kshattriyas out of sheer racial spite.

On hearing this challenge, Rama at once presented himself before Parasurama, and declared himself as the breaker of Janaka's bow, and enquired where the harm of it had been. Parasurama stormed all the more angrily at this question, and Rama, just as coolly, explained that it was an old, rusty, rickety weapon of war, the breaking of which meant no loss to any one in the world. Parasurama was not a whit persuaded to accept this explanation, and, with his eyes darting fire, exclaimed: "It was an old rusty weapon,—yes, but the breaker of it merits death!"

Lakshmana could not maintain his neutrality any longer, and stepping up to Parasurama, he said, "We are Kshattriyas, and no Kshattriya is ever frightened by tall talk, such as yours."

Feeling lest Lakshmana's interposition should incense the wrath of the frenzied fanatic all the more, Rama, without giving a chance to Parasurama to reply, said, "It is I that has broken the bow, and if there is any punishment for it, it is my right to receive it."

Parasurama seemed to be a little pacified at this frank admission. He asked Rama to have Lakshmana removed from his presence, saying that he could not endure the sight of him. Lakshmana mischievously replied to this, saying, "Close thy eyes, and the whole world will become invisible to thee." This sarcasm inflamed the Brahman's anger to a ruddy flame, and turning to Rama, he said that his brother's rude jokes cut him more keenly than an edged sword, and that his insolence received the indirect approval of Rama himself. Lakshmana was not at all willing to be repulsed by mere words, and he again retorted, "Your own words are not particularly sweet to me, and so the less you wag your tongue the better it is. But would you just let me know what exactly you want? If Rama has broken Janaka's bow, what is that to you?"

Unable to bear the taunt any longer, Parasurama lifted up his axe to hew down the head

of Lakshmana ; but Rama pointed his finger at the upraised weapon, and lo ! it kept suspended in mid-air, fast-fixed, immoveable, and Parasurama stood like a painted warrior with lifted axe, unable to move one way or the other.

"I see," said Parasurama, "I have come across the very man I have searched in all my life. But I will put this to further proof." At this tacit recognition of Rama's supremacy, his joints became flexible again, his hand dropped down, and he recovered the use of his arm. And then he handed to Rama a huge bow, and challenged him to bend it, if he claimed to be the real breaker of Janaka's bow. Rama took the weapon and easily bent it double, and then fixing an arrow ~~to it~~, he aimed a shot at Parasurama, and said, "Know now, O braggart, that I never draw my bow in vain ; but since you are a holy Brahman I cannot slay you. Tell me therefore at whom I should shoot this arrow."

Parasurama was instantly humbled, and he had no doubt left in his heart that the bowman in front of him was indeed the Rama of whose advent he had been supernaturally forewarned in his meditative moods ; and the vainglorious villain softened down to the adoring disciple,

and fell down on his knees and implored forgiveness, saying, "Forgive my rash haste in taking thee to be a common Kshattriya. I know thee now, and my ambition would be to die at thy hands but for thy own clemency in sparing my life. Yes, my race is run, and I am vanishing in the depths of the forest, never more to appear before mortal eyes."

The accident was now happily past, and Dasaratha and the marriage procession resumed their journey to Ayodhya, where the people accorded them an enthusiastic reception. The whole city was *en fête*, and the inhabitants vied with one another in demonstrating their joy at the happy wedding of the princes.

CHAPTER V.

Banishment.

Marriage according to Hindu belief marks the second or middle stage of a man's life ; it constitutes the transition between light-hearted youth and the grave responsibilities of a householder. The princes of Ayodhya had now entered upon the stage of householders, and were thus fit to bear the burdens of domestic and state management. Their father Dasaratha had become old and infirm, and had withdrawn his heart more and more from the affairs of the world, directing it more and more to thoughts of God. He was seriously thinking of assuming the rôle of a retired devotee after leaving the concerns of the state to the charge of his eldest son. To make a public pronouncement of his intention and to consult his officers of state, he summoned a meeting of his councillors, and gave expression to his views in the following words :—

“Ministers of the state,—You know well how deeply interested I have always been in

every matter affecting the public weal, and how strenuously I have striven, while health and strength favoured, to promote the prosperity of the realm that has descended to me from my illustrious ancestors. But now health and strength are both giving way ; and more than that, with the approaching sunset of life, the brightness of worldly aims and objects seems to fade more and more before my eyes, which have begun to look for a glory I vainly sought on earth. To be brief, I have resolved to go into retirement, to pass the remainder of my days in peace and prayer. My eldest son, Rama, is of age to bear the burden of royalty ; and he is strong and valiant, trustworthy and honorable, as you all know ; and I have not the least doubt he will discharge his sovereign duties more worthily than my aged self. I therefore wish to instal him on the throne and have him recognised as my successor. If this proposal meets with your approval, I pray you to signify the same, and also to suggest to me what further steps should be taken to bring about a fulfilment of my wishes. You are free to dissent from my views ; you may, if you like, refuse me leave to go ; you are likewise at liberty to nominate

any one else as my successor. I wish you to judge this question without prejudice or partiality, and to communicate your decision as speedily as possible."

For some minutes, silence held the assembly in speechless thought, and after due deliberation, the senior counsellor, as spokesman of the princes and people, replied as follows:—"May it please Your Majesty,—On behalf of the lords and commons of this great kingdom, I beg to tender you our respectful thanks for allowing us a chance of giving expression to our views on a matter of such vital concern for the common weal. We welcome the opportunity with gratitude and joy, and in obedience to your royal command we do hereby communicate to you our hearty acquiescence in the proposal you have put forward before us. Both by the law of the land and by dint of ability, Rama is unquestionably fit to take your place on the ancient throne of Kosala."

The King was exceedingly delighted to see his own choice confirmed and ratified by the unanimous assent of the assembly. Then Rama was sent for, and the King blessed him and made known his wishes. Rama expressed his readiness to obey the royal will, and it seemed

to be finally settled among all parties that Rama was to succeed to the throne. The city was decorated and illuminated in honour of the auspicious proclamation, and the citizens wandered through the streets at night, feasting, chatting, and making merry in every way they chose.

Now, amid all these rejoicings there was one who actually mourned at the joy that prevailed through the city, and this was the old nurse of Prince Bharata, son of the Queen Kekayi. This woman was a hunch-back, named Manthara, and she bore a secret ill-will against Rama ever since the prince, as a little child, had once struck her in a boyish frolic. Her heart rebelled at the thought of Rama's accession to the throne ; and so, as soon as she heard the public proclamation of that fact, she approached her mistress, Kekayi, and said to her :

“Canst thou really rejoice at this act of gross injustice to thyself and thy son ? Hast thou heard naught ? Kausalya is to supersede thee in the royal favour ! Her son, Rama—Rama, the wicked—is to become king, and thy own Bharata is to be relegated to the position of a subject,—or possibly a slave ; and thou art thyself to wait upon the Queen-mother Kausalya

as a bond-woman, and to pay homage to thy daughter-in-law Sita, who is to be queen."

Kekayi replied, "Why, what harm is there in Rama's becoming king? He is the eldest of the princes, and is entitled to reign by right of primogeniture. He loves my son, Bharata, most dearly, and honours me as he honours his own mother. Why shouldst thou, of all people, be opposed to Rama's rule?"

Manthara affected to be seized with wonder at these words of the Queen, and she promptly replied: "Because I love my Bharata most. Dost thou thyself not love thy own son? Art thou turned blind to thy own interests? Dost thou not perceive the abyss of misery and degradation into which thou and thy son are destined to be plunged in case thy son's claims to the throne are overlooked, claims which are in no degree less strong than Rama's, for while Rama's rights are based on the law of the land, Bharata's title is founded on the law of love. Has not the doting monarch sworn his tenderest love to thee? And was that love taken by thee as a mere hollow profession, springing and dying on the lips? I am older than thou art, and have been witness of dark deeds done in the best of royal households.

Can my own darling, Bharata, become the slave of Rama ? I know full well that jealous Rama will drive thy guileless, guiltless son into exile, or perhaps assassinate him, for fear his brighter virtues outshine the paler glimmer of Rama's tinsel. Arise, thou heedless woman, and do a mother's part in saving thy Bharata. Thou hast only got to speak to the Maharaja, and if he means at all to be true to his plighted troth, he will grant thy wish. Any other woman in thy situation would prefer death to a life of servitude."

These words readily produced their intended effect upon the heart of Queen Kekayi, and she was worked up to a high pitch of jealousy. But she failed to perceive how a mere expression of a wish from her could set aside a royal proclamation made after mature deliberation and with the full concurrence of the council of state. So she protested, " But how can I prevail upon the Maharaja to abrogate his own royal decree ? Dost thou not feel that matters have gone too far ahead ?"

Manthara was prepared for a rejoinder even to such a cogent objection. She said, " You have only to remind the Maharaja of the two

boons he once granted you, and claim their fulfilment now. Nothing is simpler than this."

Kekayi stood still, plunged in thought. Would even such a claim prove of any avail against a state decree? The boons were at best a private compact between herself and the King, and could such a domestic agreement have power to annul a solemn proclamation? How was she to proceed about her business? She could not fling herself upon the Maharaja's neck and be like a child crying for the moon. And even if she did that,—well, then, she deserved to be answered like a child, with some sort of evasive reply.

Manthara noticed her wavering, and to strike the iron while it was hot, she resumed her machinations, and said, "I appreciate thy difficulty, but thy path is clear. Go into the mourning-room, and make a great show of sorrow and anger. The King will hear of it, and then the rest is simple."

Kekayi did as she was advised by her hunch-backed maid. Shutting herself up in the mourning-room, she flung herself down on the bare floor, crying and sobbing in a hysterical manner. When the King came into the inner apartments

to go to his bedchamber, he was apprised of the affliction of his favorite queen, and he at once hastened into her chamber to see what the matter was with her. But the queen was not there, and on inquiry he learned that she was in the mourning-room, where the Maharaja discovered her lying on the bare ground, with her robes and jewels scattered on the floor, her long tresses all dishevelled, and sighs and groans issuing thick from her lips. The King raised her up tenderly, and inquired what had happened, but she refused to listen to anything, and spurned away his efforts at consolation. But he persisted in cajoling and consoling her, and promised to do whatever might be necessary to cheer her up again. He made repeated protestations of his love for her, and implored her to divulge the secret of her pain, undertaking with the strongest oaths to do all in his power to meet her wishes. Then it was that the sighing and sobbing seemed to subside ; but still it required some more of asseveration for the wily queen to assume a speaking mood. At last, finding that she had pushed the King into a corner from whence it would be impossible for him to escape, she said, "All I want is that deeds should redeem the

pledge of words. I have not more than a few hours to live, and I want you therefore to fulfil the two boons you promised me once."

The fond monarch suspected nothing amiss, and he renewed his assurance to grant her anything she asked, confirming his words by the most solemn oaths. Then Kekayi, feeling that she had tightened the chains sufficiently, spoke out, "The first boon I ask is that my son Bharata be installed on the throne; and the second is that Rama be banished to a forest for fourteen years."

Dasaratha took these words as he would have taken a bullet in his breast. He was so violently shocked that he was unable to speak a word. He sat like one struck with a sudden paralysis. He gazed vacantly, sometimes on the ceiling, sometimes on the floor, and his heart seemed to be sinking lower and lower within his breast. Shortly afterwards, however, came a violent reaction; his blood warmed up all at once; passion flared up in his eyes and on his visage, and he bit his lips in rage as he bellowed out, "Treacherous woman,—thou hast made a foul plot to ruin my noble house! What has Rama done to thee? He is a boy that has

scarcely an enemy on earth. I loved thee more than ever woman was loved ; and I have been well-rewarded by thy foul treachery. Thou hast literally been a serpent nursed on my bosom. Dost thou not know, false creature, that Rama is as dear to me as the breath of my nostrils, and that I cannot send him away to the forests ? Take back thy precious boons—I'll none of them."

Kekayi was not the woman to retreat so easily. She met the King's wrath with wrath, and retorted, "If thou wilt break thy royal oath, it is no business of mine to hinder thee. Who is the traitor in that case,—the one who falsely breaks his vow, or the one who claims fulfilment of it ? I will drink poison to-night, and put an end to myself, and not live to witness the sad spectacle of a king's moral downfall."

The King at once relented. The threat of suicide was too severe for the royal dotard, and he said, "Thou art a coquette, Kekayi. How could the thought of self-destruction enter thy soft heart ? Thou art a perfect witch, and I am under thy powerful spell of beauty. Have pity on me, my darling. How can I revoke my own mandate ? How can I send my own son into

exile? I would that death might release me from this torture!"

Kekayi watched the gradual working of her trick. She was now in possession of the key of the King's heart: she had discovered the vulnerable point in his armour, and with admirable aim she directed her shafts at it. "If thou dost honour thyself,—if thou dost care for truth and honesty, keep thy vow, and grant me the boons thou hast promised, or, what is much simpler, watch my dying agonies."

In his despair and anguish, Dasaratha cried out, "Hear me, O close-curtained night; drag thy ponderous length until eternity, and never let the tell-tale sun peep through thy thick blinds! Throw thy muffling mantle over my chilling shame, and hide this monstrous misdeed within the ample folds of thy trailing garments!"

In this sorrowful strain did the unhappy King continue to mourn all through that night, and when the pale twilight touched the eastern sky, he spoke one brief word to Kekayi, and held his tongue, and never spoke again, though life still slumbered within his breast. "I grant thy cursed boons," said he, "but thyself I do hereby renounce."

The city was astir with gaily-dressed citizens long before the sun seemed to be astir from his resting-place. Ayodhya had not slept the previous night. Hammer and chisel had been busy all through the night to build triumphal arches, to set up temporary dancing-booths, to erect stately pavilions, in preparation for the ceremony of royal installation to be held on the morrow. The golden throne was brought out of the jewel-room and placed in the coronation chamber. Elephants were decked with the richest trappings, horses accoutred in their brightest harness; the royal body-guard in polished armour were drawn up at the entrance to the palace-hall; flags and banners waved jauntily in the wind; the thrilling trumpet and the sounding clarion pealed forth the joyous news in every direction; crowds of spectators, agape with curiosity, thronged the streets; and the whole city was full of that boisterous bustle and activity which precedes the coronation of a popular monarch.

But the King was still keeping the inner chambers. Suspecting some untoward cause, Sumantra, the prime minister, hastened to the royal apartments to learn the reason of the Maharaja's continued absence. He was met by

Queen Kekayi, who ordered the minister to send Rama, as the Maharaja desired to speak with him. Rama obeyed the royal summons without delay, and in a moment appeared before the King and made his obeisance to him. The King burst into a flood of tears at the sight of his son. He attempted to speak, but his voice was choked with grief, and the only words he could utter were, "O Rama!"

Rama was in consternation to see his aged father weeping so profusely. Fearing he himself might have offended the King, Rama made haste to implore his forgiveness, "Have I unwittingly grieved my sire in any way? Speak, Mother, what is it that is vexing the Maharaja's spirit? Why is his face clouded with sorrow and his eyes raining tears? I would rather suffer death than pain his heart by word or deed."

The Maharaja was silent, but Kekayi replied, "Well, if that be so, the Maharaja will feel happy again. He is neither offended nor grieved, but is afraid to give out his wishes until you promise to carry them out."

Rama immediately promised to obey his father's behests, even if he were asked to die,

and Kekayi, binding him too with the same chain with which she had fastened the King, lost no time in saying, "Now, listen to me. The Maharaja had once promised to grant me any two boons that I might choose to ask; I deferred the selection then, and now I have obtained their fulfilment. The Maharaja has, therefore, decreed that Bharata shall be installed on the throne, and that you shall go into banishment for fourteen years. Now, speak, if your heart is willing to obey these commands."

Before Rama had time to speak, the poor old Monarch burst forth into a storm of weeping and wailing; but Rama was absolutely unmoved. Calmly and cheerfully he expressed his willingness by saying, "I know of no duty but to obey. I will go into the forests to-night, if that is the royal will and pleasure. I rejoice that Bharata is to be the King."

So saying, Rama bowed to his father and to his step-mother, and hastened to the chamber of Kausalya to take leave of his own mother before departing for the jungle. The queen was at that moment engaged in offering worship to the gods, and when she heard the awful news, she fell into a passion of weeping, exclaiming

in her agony, "O that thou hadst never been born ! O my beloved son, thou light of my eyes ! I lived for many years a childless dame, and then I thought childlessness to be the cruellest curse that could ever fall to the lot of a woman. O, I was mistaken ; childlessness is a blessing compared to this misfortune ! O my boy, thou wert the staff of my age, and where will my tottering steps stumble now that thou art snatched away from me,—snatched, not by the hand of Fate, which no power can arrest, but by the malice of a foul intriguer ! But why should I blame Kekayi,—I ought rather to blame my own stars that have worked out this inconceivable wrong. What has happened to my heart that it has not yet split into fragments ? Where is the benignant god of Death that he is still tarrying ? Are his blissful mansions so crowded that he cannot accommodate one more crying soul ? O Rama, I am a woman, and I am helpless ; I dare not even speak a word. But how will the people suffer this hideous wrong ? How will the heavens look upon this shameful outrage ? How could the righteous monarch stoop to such a base snare ? How didst thou thyself thrust thy neck into the trap ? O Rama, speak,—for my heart is breaking."

Rama listened patiently to all this plaintive wail, and then coolly replied,—“Mother, dear Mother,—I know nothing but to obey. I have no concern with the why and the how,—my only duty is to do what I am bidden.”

“Well, then,” said Kausalya, “I as thy mother bid thee not to go to the jungle. If thou wilt not obey me, I will take no food, no rest, and will starve myself to death.”

“O, mother,” replied Rama, “your command comes too late. I am already under orders, and my orders are to proceed to the forest without delay. I did not come to make any protest,—I came only to take your permission. Let me have your blessings, and bid me go. Do not ask me to break my plighted word.”

Kausalya still pleaded ; but Rama was inflexible. Implicit obedience to his father’s word of command was to him the highest duty, and he recognised no right in himself, either to call in question the propriety or the legality or the extremity of that word. He tried therefore to console his mother, assuring her that all would be well, and that there was no occasion for her to give way to grief. Kausalya, seeing that her son was not to be swerved from the path of filial

obedience, held her tongue, and Rama fell down at her feet and received her blessings.

He next went to his wife, Sita, to bid her farewell. Contrary to his expectations, he found Sita not at all inclined towards grief. She heard the whole story without betraying any emotion, and when Rama finished his utterance, she replied, in a tone of entreaty rather than of sorrow, "A wife is only the inseparable shadow of her husband,—wherever he goes, she goes too. If you must depart for the jungle, it is my duty to step before you to sweep the path. With you, I shall be happy in a forest : without you, I shall be miserable in a palace. What have horses, and chariots, and gilded domes, and liveried footmen to do with a woman's life ? Her sole sustenance and support is her lord and husband. His presence will transform the darkest dwelling to a matchless mansion : his absence will convert paradise itself to a hell."

Rama tried to dissuade her from accompanying him, by dilating on the horrors of forest life such as were calculated to deter a shrinking female heart : "How is it possible that a tender creature like thyself, nursed in the lap of luxury, cuddled in the breast of affection, should tread

the thorny path of the jungle with me? The forest regions are full of wild beasts and venomous reptiles. There is nothing to eat except roots and fruits, and no shelter to be found except the dark and unwholesome shade of tall trees. The summer's heat, the winter's cold, the monsoon's rains are all severely felt, and, to add to these miseries, destructive hurricanes frequently visit those forlorn tracts and sweep everything before them. O Sita, thou art dearer to me than life: how can I bear the thought of thy suffering these trials? Absence will make thee tenfold dearer, and the pangs of separation will chasten and purify our loves. Talk not, therefore, of going with me, but abide where thou art in peace and patience until I come back to thee."

But Sita was still unyielding, and boldly replied, "I know not, I reckon not, I fear not, the so-called horrors of forest life. Horrors will turn to happiness when thou art with me. I would rather sleep on the ground—lying on a bed of brambles, by thy side, than toss alone on a silken couch in a gay and gilded hall. It is impossible for me to conceive a condition of existence aloof from thee, apart from thee. *My*

absence may make me tenfold dearer unto thee, as thou sayest, but *thy* absence will mean death to me. Take me with thee, therefore, my Love, and let me share thy trials and troubles. From my very childhood I have been brought up on the faith that the true home of a married woman is her husband's side. The wife is to her lord as the shadow is to the substance, and she cannot part from him until she parts from life itself. It is vain, therefore, to expect that I can live away from thee. No separate decree of banishment, no royal mandate is needed for me : my banishment is by tacit implication decreed in thine ; and it is no more at my option to stay back than it is for thee to overrule the unalterable decree of fate."

This sort of persuasion and counter-persuasion went on for some time longer, and when persuasion seemed to fail, Sita summoned the aid of tears to reinforce her supplications, until Rama perceived that his remonstrances were indeed vain, and he expressed his consent to take Sita with himself.

Lakshmana was from his very childhood deeply attached to Rama ; he was Rama's other self, and he too pleaded to accompany his brother

in his exile. He offered to be Rama's attendant, to guard him from harm, to do him menial services in his forest abode, to accept any servitude rather than be left behind ; Rama was greatly touched by this proof of fraternal affection ; but, as in the case of Sita, he tried to dissuade him from carrying out his resolve. "I know," said Rama, "there is none more affectionate, none more dutiful, nor more faithful than thou, my brother ; but yet I must forbid thee ; for if thou too goest, who shall be there to tend Queen Kausalya and Queen Sumitra ? Thou knowest our aged father is a helpless captive in the hands of Queen Kekayi, and Queen Kekayi is not overfriendly to the elder Queens. Thou knowest too that Queen Kausalya will need constant care and tendance during my absence in the woods ; and since Sita is bent on going, I cannot allow the further depletion of the house, which, as the present conspiracy has sufficiently shown, needs careful vigilance."

Lakshmana humbly submitted : "Harbour no mistrust : all shall be well. Bharata will look after the whole household ; it is not the kingdom alone of which he is the trustee, but the safety and comfort of every individual member

of the royal household as well. If, however, the loftiness of the unexpected position to which he has mounted by such a sudden leap, should make him giddy,—well, in that case, vengeance will repay the arrears of brotherly affection. Both Queen Kausalya and Queen Sumitra have armed body-guards of their own, and in case of any actual or apprehended violation of their rights, neither of them will lack champions in Ayodhya. But you, my brother, will be all alone in the forest,—I should rather say, worse than alone, for Sita's presence will be more a hindrance than a help. Permit me, therefore, to follow you like an attendant, and with my bow and quiver serve as a shield to yourself and to Sita."

There was sound sense in Lakshmana's pleadings : they were not mere effusions of sentiment, like those of Sita, and they, therefore, made a stronger appeal to Rama's masculine mind ; and he consented to take Lakshmana with him with less demur.

CHAPTER VI.

Departure from Ayodhya.

All was now ready for the departure of the exiles. Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita quickly completed their preparations for the long journey to the forests of Dandaka, somewhere at the foot of the Vindhya mountains, in what is now called Bundelkhand. No elaborate preparations were needed ; it was not a bridal party that was starting,—it was a party of exiles going into a jungle. And they were not to travel in cushioned carriages, but were to trudge all the way on foot, with no attendants, and no luggage, except what they bore on their backs and shoulders. They had to lay aside their princely paraphernalia completely, and assume the garb of holy hermits. But it would have been awkward, and possibly impolitic, for the princes to leave the palace-gates in the garb of beggars, and so it was arranged that the party should travel in one of the royal chariots up to the first stage of

the journey, after which they were to march on foot in the full guise of anchorites.

Before mounting the chariot, Sita visited Queen Kausalya to receive her parting blessings ; and the bereaved mother, convulsed with grief, found her only consolation in the fact that Sita was accompanying her son to the woods. She said, " May the gods reward thee for thy heroic devotion to thy lord ! Thou art a rare specimen of thy sex ; thou art not one of those women who are loving and faithful as long as they are enjoying the sunshine of happiness and prosperity, but the moment that dark clouds of misfortune begin to bedim the light or benumb the warmth, their love and faith undergo a synpathetic change, and if they do not actually desert their lords, it is simply because they have nowhere else to go. Adversity tries friends, but it tries a wife oftener, and tries her surely and severely. I am grateful to God that thou, though yet only a tender girl, art not of that too common class. I bless thee, O my daughter, with all my heart. Mayest thou be ever true and righteous ; mayest thou always follow thy lord and husband with wifely pride and wifely devotion !"

Sita touched the feet of the Queen, and replied, "I will not fail in my duty. My husband is to me like a God ; I know no other religion ; I worship no other God ; I follow no other creed. The light shall part from off the face of the sun and moon ere I ever part from my husband's side. The sweetest lute yields no music without the string ; the stateliest chariot is idle without its wheels ; even so is a woman without her lord. All other affections can be measured, but the love of a wife for her husband is like the skies, boundless, immeasurable, infinite."

Such a profession of love and loyalty could not fail to draw fresh tears from Queen Kausalya's eyes ; and Sita, all unmoved from the first, consoled her by saying, "Grieve not, my loving mother ; have faith and trust in the powers of virtue. Nothing can harm a spotless soul. The fourteen years of our exile shall pass swiftly away like a troubled nightmare, and thou shall once more see thy son returned to thy home and restored to thy bosom."

Meanwhile, the charioteer was growing impatient at the delay. The day was drawing to a close, and they had to accomplish a long distance before they could find a night's halting-place. So

- the party mounted the chariot without further ado of leave-taking, and the fiery coursers galloped on their way through the city streets, where the same crowds that had assembled to see the joyous coronation of Rama now wept to see their favourite prince borne away to the jungles. A large concourse soon clung to the hind wheels of the rattling chariot, running as fast as the coursers galloped, in order to follow Rama with their eyes as far as their legs could carry them. Others, who were unable to keep pace with the horses, entreated the proud chariot-driver to drive slowly, in order that they might be able to follow some distance. Those who gazed from the house-tops regretted at the fiery speed, as not giving them a good view of the beloved face. Some of the citizens wept profusely and hid their eyes with the palm of their hands, as if unable to bear the sight of their prince going as an exile. Some again loudly murmured at the injustice of the aged monarch, and called him a henpecked dotard whose word was null, and whose mandate naught. Some, however, blamed not the promise-bound King, but the promise-extorting Queen, the self-seeking Kekayi. Thus, amidst the murmurs of woe and blame, amidst the streaming of tears,

amidst the breaking of sighs and sobs, Rama's chariot sped on through the city streets, until it crossed the city bounds, and entered upon the high road leading southwards. Then it was that Rama felt some relief from the torture of witnessing scenes of woe and hearing groans and shrieks proceeding from the multitude whom he loved so well and over whom he hoped to bear sway as king that same sad morning.

The shades of night approached as the rattle of Rama's chariot-wheels echoed by the banks of the clear Tamasa, a slender stream that still crosses the road not far south of Ayodhya. The banks of this tiny rivulet were heavily overshadowed by trees, and in one of these natural bowers Rama decided to bivouac for the night. It was discovered that quite a crowd of citizens had followed the chariot, at greater or less distance, out of the city bounds, and quite a crowd of them overtook the exiles soon after they spread out their mattress and lay down on it for a little welcome rest. Rama was feeling utterly exhausted,—not on account of the toilsome nature of the journey or the distance traversed, but on account of the volleys of tears and cries through which he had to pass. The

silence of the evening was a still more welcome relief after the loud shrieks of wailing and weeping that had so long smitten his ears, and, addressing Lakshmana, he said, "Dost thou mark the voiceless forest stretching far into the invisible? What a striking contrast with the many-voiced city we have just left behind! O Lakshmana, my heart was riven by the cries of the sorrowing citizens; and the tears shed by my mother will ever live in my memory and haunt me and harass me even in my sleep. But her I pity not so much, as the feeble monarch who, in his declining days, when actually thinking of retiring from the world, has fallen a helpless captive into the hands of a siren queen. I have, however, strong faith in Bharata; I have every hope that he will tend his father and mothers with filial devotion.—Now, you wait here for a moment, while I go down to the river to quench my thirst."

So saying, Rama stepped down to the water's edge, and washing his face and hands quaffed a few draughts of the crystal liquid. Sumantra loosened the horses from their traces, and gave them a grooming and some fodder. Rama returned from the river bank, and, determining to

observe the first night of his exile by a fast, lay down on a pallet and slept. He rose from sleep while yet the sun was far below the horizon, while yet the stars shone thick in the autumn sky, and rousing Lakshmana said to him in a whisper, "The loyal citizens, who have followed our track so far, are still plunged in sleep, footsore and fatigued, and it will be some hours, I presume, before they wake. Let us seize this occasion and elude their pursuit ; for, if we tarry longer, they will doubtless follow us further, besieging our ears with entreaties and prayers. Let us therefore give them a slip, and rattle away before they have a chance to miss us from their midst."

Lakshmana agreed, and Sumantra hastily harnessed the steeds, and the chariot drove away at a high speed, and crossing the Tamasa, pursued a by-path, travelling south and south, through tracts of tender green or ripening yellow, until they neared the banks of another stream, the Gomti, which they crossed at a spot still remembered and perpetuated by the people of Sultanpur under the name of Sitakund. It was here that they met the morning sun ; they had thrown the loyal citizens of Ayodhya far behind ; when they

• woke they found not Rama in their midst, and with their hearts laden with sorrow, wended their way back to Ayodhya.

Rama and his party travelled on, southwards and southwards, all through the livelong day, until in the evening twilight they descried the broad expanse of the river Ganges, flowing with a majesty of motion signifying the presence of a deity to the minds of the devout. They thus concluded that they had arrived within view of the holy city of Prayaga ; but there was no time that day to cross the river, and so the party encamped for the night on the northern bank of the Ganges.

When morning dawned, Rama dismissed Sumantra, and told him to take back the chariot to Ayodhya, determining to perform the rest of the journey on foot. Here, too, the exiles doffed their royal garments and put on coats of bark, in the style of anchorites ; and then they applied to Guha, chief of the Nishada tribe, for a boat and boatmen to row them across. The village chief gladly lent what assistance was demanded from him, and soon the wanderers were sailing on the broad expanse of the still swollen river. Sita took the occasion to address a prayer to the

river-deity, and made her a vow to offer a magnificent worship when her husband should return home safely at the close of the fourteen years' term of exile. In a few hours the party disembarked on the southern bank of the river, on which is situated the far-famed Prayaga, renowned even then as one of the holiest places of Hindu pilgrimage. Here, at the confluence of the two sacred streams of the Ganges and the Jumna, they alighted from their boat, and in the rays of the descending sun espied a thin pillar of smoke ascending heavenwards, and took it as indicating the spot where perhaps a holy hermit had his hidden hermitage. In that direction they proceeded, guided by the curling smoke, and soon discovered, embowered within a cluster of shady trees, the abode of the sapient saint and sage, Bharadwaja. Into this hermitage the exiles entered, and found the Rishi discoursing to a band of devoted disciples on the sublime truths of religion and philosophy. Seeing a party of strangers at the door, the sage suspended his discourse ; and Rama, finding a fit opportunity, introduced himself as the prince of Ayodhya proceeding to the forest by command of his father, Dasaratha, and presented his companions as his

brother and his wife respectively. Bharadwaja bade them welcome, and offered them shelter under his roof, adding that Rama's arrival was not an unexpected event to him. Rama thanked the sage for his courteous offer of hospitality, but declined to remain in permanent residence, because he feared that at Prayaga he would be constantly visited by people from Ayodhya, the place being not sufficiently far to prevent such intrusions upon his peace. "Well, then," replied the sage, "twenty miles or so away there is a lonely hill surrounded by deep jungle, and to that hill, named Chitrakuta, thou canst go and live in fair seclusion from the rude gazes of the multitude."

Rama consented to go to Chitrakuta, and next morning, the party crossed the Jumna, and as they were sailing on her breast, Sita addressed a similar prayer to the goddess of the Jumna, asking for her husband's safety during his period of exile and his safe return to Ayodhya. Soon they crossed over to the opposite bank, and disembarking, proceeded on foot through the gleaming glades of the wooded shore, southwards and southwards still, until, in the golden glitter of the setting sun, they beheld the verdant peak

of Chitrakuta looming large in the misty twilight.

Six days and six nights had the exiles roamed from their home, and now at length they had reached their doleful destination. Here at last was their journey's end,—Chitrakuta, happily called the "Peak of Beauty." A stray offshoot of the holy Vindhya, it still stands, as in the days of Rama, clothed in sylvan beauty of such rare delicacy as to justify its ancient name of "Peak of Beauty." Flowers blossomed in virgin profusion on every side ; song-birds trilled out their tremulous notes on twig and tree ; bees hummed forth their melodious murmuring in the honeyed cups of sweet-scented blossoms ; and various other insects, gay and gaudy or green and gray, flitted through the rich foliage, with buzzings of their own. At intervals, herds of long-tailed monkeys swept past in serried ranks, dispersing among the branches of tall trees or disporting amid the long grass, making wild antics, or directing mock attacks against one another.

Selecting a convenient site on the hill-top, Rama and Lakshmana built themselves a cottage with the leaves and twigs of trees ; and in this

- hut they decided to spend the fourteen years of their exile, free from molestation, safe from intrusion, immune from harm.

CHAPTER VII.

Death of Dasaratha.

We shall leave the princely exiles unmolested and allow them to settle themselves in their woodland abode, and meanwhile we shall return to Ayodhya. Since the departure of Rama, a painful change had come over the repentant monarch. His eyes had become suddenly dimmed ; wrinkles had furrowed his shrunken cheeks ; and a ghastly pallor sat upon his whole countenance. He seldom spoke a word or opened his eyelids, and it seemed he had cut off all sympathies with the various currents of activity that ran within or without the royal palace. Grief gnawed at his heart, and repentance burrowed into his soul ; he felt as though there was no joy for him in this life, nor hope in the next.

Queen Kausalya tended him assiduously in his state of dark despondency, and in the attentions she showed to her husband she partially forgot her own sorrows. Night and day she

tended the melancholy monarch, trying to rouse him from his death-like stupor, and attempting to bring back a smile upon his pallid lips ; but all in vain. In vain she offered consolation to his heart ; in vain she spoke of Rama's courage and Rama's virtue ; in vain she gave him the hope that the fourteen years would pass away swiftly and restore his Rama to him. Nothing on earth seemed to have power to enliven him even for a moment, and the only symptom of vitality left in him was the occasional gleam that lighted up his eyes whenever a thought of Rama flashed upon his mind. When the Queen announced the return of Sumantra, the King, for the first time, emitted a spark of life ; for, though knowing full well that it was out of the question, he had hoped against hope that the same Sumantra who had borne his Rama away would bring him back when he returned. He started at the name of Sumantra, as though he were a friend he was hourly expecting ; and when Sumantra entered his chamber, unattended by Rama, the first word that escaped the King's lips was the name of his banished son. And instantly afterwards he fell back into a swoon.

And now death was making visible approaches upon Dasaratha's devoted head. As he lay unconscious, with his eyes closed in a semblance of slumber, his mind, in the course of its erratic wanderings, travelled through the distant past, and vividly recalled an incident of his early youth ; and with that cruel memory came back a fitful re-awakening to life, and he spoke to Queen Kausalya :—

“ Our deeds bear inevitable fruit, swift or slow, sweet or bitter ; and in my own case now I am but reaping the painful harvest of my own misdeeds. Sit still, and listen to an old forgotten incident of my life. In the days of youth I was a skilled archer, such that I could shoot an unseen game by indications of sound, and I was a keen inveterate sportsman. One day in the jungle depths I heard a distant gurgling, and thought it must be an elephant or deer or buffalo drinking water in some hidden stream. Swiftly flew an arrow from my bow, and the next moment I heard a human wailing. Hastening with a vague terror, I came upon the banks of the Sarayu, and discovered that I had mortally wounded a poor hermit boy who had come to fill his pitcher for his aged parents.

- The innocent victim had time to gasp forth one last request, that his father might be informed of his fate ; and immediately afterwards he expired. I hastened to the abode of the aged hermit, and informed him of what I had unwittingly done, and implored forgiveness. The hermit gladly forgave me, but told me, that no forgiveness could exempt me from the operation of the inexorable law of retribution, and that my ultimate fate would be to die of sorrow for the sake of a son. I little thought then that that prophecy meant anything more than an indignant curse, that I could well whisk away like a fly. For I was then a gay and gallant youth, unburdened with the cares of family or crown, and I thought no more of that slain hermit-boy than I would have thought of a slain antler or buck. But now, after half a century, my sins have come back upon me with a terrible recoil, and the bereaved hermit's words have become a dreadful prophecy."

Kausalya tried what she could to comfort the heart of the dying King, but nothing seemed to touch even the fringe of it ; and he lay wrapped up as it were in a premature shroud made up of his own remorseful thoughts. In the middle

of the night he awoke again, and cried to Kausalya, "O Kausalya, I am dying of sorrow; my eyes have grown utterly dark, and the whole world looks one vast sheet of sable black. My sorrows' crown of sorrow is that I shall die without seeing my Rama again. Happy are those forest creatures, compared with me, whose eyes behold my Rama's face!"

With these words Dasaratha fell back into a profound silence, and it was not long before his mortified spirit left its mortal tenement.

Next morning, messengers were despatched with all haste to summon Bharata, who was then living in the house of his maternal uncle; while preparations were made by the widowed Queens for the royal funeral. The news of Rama's banishment, and the death of the old King, were purposely kept away from the prince's knowledge; the messengers only reported that Bharata was urgently summoned; but as soon as he entered the gates of Ayodhya, a succession of mournful sights met his eyes, and his heart sank within him as he wondered at the significance of these evil omens. The whole city was plunged in deep gloom; the shops were closed; the citizens appeared with their heads and faces clean shaved;

women walked about in the white raiment symbolical of mourning. Arriving at the palace, the prince hurried into the apartments of his mother, and asked her what all this meant. Queen Kekayi melted into a shower of hypocritical tears, and told the startled prince that the King, his father, was dead, but that there was no occasion for sorrow, as the dying monarch had nominated him as his sole heir and successor on the throne. She then told him how cunningly she had contrived to accomplish the supersession of Rama, whom she had sent into banishment for fourteen years, in order to give ample time to her own son to consolidate his rule. All this narrative was interspersed with praise for the hunchback Manthara, whom the Queen gave the unenviable credit of having been the first to hatch the conspiracy in the crooked convolutions of her sinister heart.

Bharata could no longer restrain his patience, and he exclaimed, "No more of this gruesome tale. Mother, you are guilty of a more nefarious plot than has ever yet been evolved out of a human head or wrought by human hands. You have accomplished the downfall of a noble race ; you have committed the treasonable offence of

regicide ; and more than that, in expelling my own dear brothers, Rama and Lakshmana, from their home and hearth, you have done what is at once unwomanly, unmotherly, and inhuman. Of what good is a throne to me in the absence of my eldest brother, who is the rightful heir ? What a poor, shrunken, shrivelled king I should be, crawling on the throne like a loathsome reptile, with the secret aid of a foul conspiracy ? O mother, you have riven my heart. How can I ever show my face to my brother ? With what countenance shall I approach my mother Kausalya, who loved me more than her own son ? I must visit her at once to make what amends can be made under the circumstances."

So saying, Bharata, accompanied by Satrugna, proceeded to the chamber of Queen Kausalya, whom they found lying prostrate on the ground, bathed in a shower of freshly-fallen tears, and sighing and sobbing in the process of shedding more. Seeing the two princes enter, she sat up, reclining on one arm, and broke forth into another passion of weeping and wailing. The princes bowed to her in the most reverential manner, and sat silent until she recovered strength to speak, and then she said, "O my sons,—we

- have been hurled on a barren rock by the cruel surges of destiny. The throne of Ayodhya is lying empty ; the kingdom of Kosala is without a king ; this royal household is deprived of its head ; and ye princes, ye are orphans. This is my greatest grief now : I grieve not for the banishment of Rama, in that I have, in ye, other sons, in whose affection I can live and thrive. But, O Bharat, while our sorrow is already overwhelming, it derives an added sting from the fact that there is no time to indulge in it ; for the royal funeral is awaiting performance and the royal throne inviting an occupant."

Bharata's eyes were swimming in tears as he listened to these piteous words of the grief-stricken Queen, who in her double affliction, felt her widowhood as the more crushing of the two calamities,—if, indeed, there could be a more and a less between the two. After a pause, during which his silence was caused more by inability to speak than for choice of words, he spoke, "O Mother, grieve not ; the past is beyond recall, but not beyond redress. For, though we cannot bring back our royal father, we can assuredly bring back Rama, and seat him on his father's throne. I have no more to do with the exercise

of sovereignty now than when my dear sire was alive: I have no mind to be the grave captain, but to continue one of the gay crew, and to obey the voice of him who is born to the command. I had not the least inkling into the foul fraud which has resulted in the banishment of Rama and the death of my beloved father."

The noble speech had a visible effect upon Queen Kausalya's mind. She was greatly reassured by the prospect of her son's return, and still more relieved to learn that Bharata was not an accomplice in the conspiracy, but was on the contrary severely scandalised by it. Satrughna sorrowed like Bharata, and both began thenceforward to hate Kekayi, and particularly her humpbacked tire-woman. The moment Satrughna caught sight of her, he flew at her and kicked her down, and dragged her across the room, saying, "Thou despicable wretch art the cause of all our present woe."

Kekayi ran off in terror, fearing perhaps that a similar treatment might be meted out to herself; but Bharata simply told her that she need not be afraid of any retribution save the pricks and pangs of her own conscience and the ultimate reward that Heaven might give her for her

irremediable wrong. He added, "From this moment, Mother, you may take me as dead and gone. I cannot be the son of a woman that has perpetrated this hideous sin, even though that woman be my own mother."

With this parting shot, Bharata left his mother's presence abruptly, and after performing his father's obsequies, he proceeded to make arrangements to start in quest of Rama with a view to bringing him back to Ayodhya. A meeting of the state council was summoned, at which representatives of every class and community were also invited to share the deliberations. Bharata and Satrugghna appeared in the whitest apparel, showing that they were still in the observance of mourning.* The great throne stood empty at the upper end of the great hall, the two princes taking their seats only at the foot of the steps. It was a most melancholy gathering, just the reverse of that brilliant assemblage which, a few weeks ago, had received with acclamations the announcement of Rama's succession to the throne. Vashistha as the High Priest of the realm commenced the proceedings with a speech in which he referred in feeling terms to the demise of the old monarch, and

eulogised the virile virtues of Bharata's character, dwelling at some length upon the last mandate of the dying King appointing Bharata as his successor. He added in a tone of impressive solemnity, "A royal throne abhors a vacuum ; if it is not occupied in peace by a rightful heir, it is apt to be seized by force by an unlawful hand ; so that, in the interests of public peace and public tranquillity, in the interests of those millions whom Providence has placed in your charge, in the interests of the good name of that illustrious race of Raghu from which you are descended, I exhort you, in the name of all that is sacred, all that is estimable in human eyes, not to decline the crown that has come down to you from an unbroken line of mighty monarchs distinguished alike for the glories of war and the triumphs of peace."

The peroration of this magnificent oration was worthy of a better cause, and Bharata felt the impropriety of such an appeal from the lips of a sage who had for many years been the trustiest minister of the late King. Difficult as he found utterance on an occasion like this, he felt it his duty to make a bold reply : "It is with a rude shock of surprise," said he, "that I have

- listened to such a speech from the lips of one who has been my father's spiritual preceptor, and who was until the last the keeper of his conscience in the literal sense. Your Holiness must have known that my father was incapable of committing an act of flagrant injustice such as he was made to commit under influences I need not specify. You must have, likewise, seen how tenderly attached he had ever been to Rama. You must have also heard from his own lips that he had from the first chosen Rama for his heir and successor. And having known, seen, and heard all this, you still stand up to uphold the claim of a prince whom a shameful intrigue attempted to hoist up to the throne over the head of his elder, his senior, his rightful sovereign !” Then, turning to the assembly, Bharata went on : “ Let it be known unto one and all that the sole heir and successor to the throne of royal Raghu is my eldest brother Rama, whose title is based on the triple foundation of birth, choice, and ability. Not only is he the eldest of us all, not only is he the ablest of us all, but he has also been chosen and elected both by the royal will and by the vote of the people. I pray you, therefore, do not press this painful subject any

more to my notice. I have declared my will already, and I repeat that it shall never be mine to usurp a throne to which I was not born."

There can be no question that, as between Rama and Bharata, the eldest prince was by far the most popular ; so that the people were not at all grieved to hear Bharata's refusal to accept the crown ; and when they heard that he was ready to set out for the forest in quest of Rama, they received the announcement with thunderous cheers.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Meeting of the Brothers.

Bharata quickly left Ayodhya with a strong army for the forests of Chitrakuta, with the determined object of bringing back Rama. He was accompanied by Satrughna, Queen Kausalya, and some of the officials of state, in order that nothing might be wanting to make the persuasion and entreaty as forcible as could be. The party crossed the Ganges at Prayaga, and Guha, chief of the Nishadas, helped them most gladly with a flotilla of boats and rafts for that purpose when he learned that the object of the party was to go in quest of Rama and to bring him back to Ayodhya. The next day they arrived in the vicinity of Chitrakuta. Rama and Lakshmana from their hermitage watched an immense army approaching their abode, and they at once discerned that it was Bharata that was leading them; and Lakshmana's first impulse was one of fear and misgiving ; for he said, "Having sent us to exile, they now seem to be thirsting for our

blood ; else why this pomp and circumstance of war ?”

Rama quickly quieted his brother's fear by replying, “ You are utterly mistaken : there can be no treacherous motive lurking in Bharata's bosom ; take my word for it.”

Leaving his army at a distance and walking alone, Bharata made up to Rama, and Rama ran forward eagerly to meet his brother. Bharata was sorely grieved to see the prince of Kosala appearing in the humble garb of an anchorite, with matted hair on head, and clad in bark ; and falling down at his feet, he burst into a torrent of tears, exclaiming, “ Brother, O my brother !”

Rama raised him up from his kneeling posture, saying, “ Rise, my brother ; it grieves my heart to see you so sad. O tell me why you are thus afflicted with grief. O tell me how our dear parents are at Ayodhya. O tell me why you have come to this lonely forest, instead of ruling the kingdom, which should be your first care.”

Bharata replied, “ What has crown or kingdom got to do with me ? I am a younger prince, and a younger has no right to rule in preference to an elder. The crown of Kosala is yours by every right, human and divine ; and I

have come to escort you home, so that you may sit upon your throne and rule your kingdom,—the kingdom which is yours by the law of the land and by the unanimous voice of your loving people. Our beloved Sire, unable to endure the pain of your exile, died within a week of your departure, before even I myself could return from my maternal uncle's place. I returned in time, however, to perform his obsequies; and I have set out from Ayodhya after making a solemn public declaration of my refusal to accept the crown on any conditions whatsoever. Hasten, therefore, back to your realm, and rule it rightly as your ancestors did in the days of yore."

Then Bharata told him that Queen Kausalya had also come, and Rama made up to her and fell down at her feet, and brought her lovingly into his cottage. And then there was a second outburst of lamentation at this meeting of the widowed mother and the hermit-prince. The Queen-Mother spoke no word about Bharata's refusal of the crown; but Bharata himself was insistent on praying to Rama to return to Ayodhya.

But Rama was inflexible. He said, "Good brother, I fully reciprocate your brotherly love,

and I deeply appreciate those lofty feelings of honour and loyalty that have impelled you to resist the temptations of a throne and content yourself with showing allegiance to an elder in descent. But you know that I am bound by my father's word of command ; and now that the lips that uttered that sacred mandate are sealed for ever, the bonds that bind me cannot be loosened until the full term of banishment is over. It would be craven treachery to my father's hallowed memory if I were now to break my vow or disobey his command. You, too, my brother, have a similar word of command to obey,—namely, to rule the kingdom until I return."

Bharata replied with much emotion: "But I never sought the crown: it was thrust upon me, and that, too, by an unwilling hand, moved by the secret machinery of an ambitious mother. I shall not advert to this painful topic any more, but only repeat that I have solemnly abjured all claim to the throne in the presence of the assembled nobility and commonalty of the realm ; and I do hereby again repeat that I renounce that meretricious title for once and all. I beseech you, therefore, come back to your own, and grace

the throne that is yours by a right derived from an unbroken succession of rulers of the Raghu race."

Rama was greatly touched by this demonstration of fraternal devotion, and in a tone at once gentle and firm, replied, "I know but one law that guides my entire conduct through life,—the law of obedience; and it is by this law, which is superior to all mere earthly laws, that I am commanded to occupy this jungle hut, and not the royal throne of Kosala. Obedience to my Sire's command is a sovereignty more glorious than the jewelled crown of Kosala itself can afford. What are crowns and kingdoms but stray waifs that float and fall in endless ebb and flow?—Duty alone is everlasting: it stands firmly on a rock which the billows of time can crumble not; and it is on this enduring rock that my faith is built. No entreaty, no persuasion, no force hath power to overthrow it; and it is utterly vain for you, therefore, to attempt to dislodge it."

Bharata, nevertheless, made one more attempt, saying, "O Rama, I am but an illiterate fool before your wisdom and your learning; so it is utterly vain, indeed, as you say, for me to convince you by argument. It is,

moreover, a sin to speak ill of the dead ; but can any one in truth assert that our sainted father made a truly equitable dispensation when he set aside a deserving elder in favour of an undeserving younger ? Far be it from me to insinuate that he acted in this manner wilfully : he was unduly influenced, in a moment of weakness, by the unconquerable force of a woman's appeal, thereby only proving the truth of the proverb which says that reason quits a man declining to his grave. These exceptional circumstances well warrant exceptional proceedings ; and if it be wrong to act in violation of or deviation from a father's command, it is a greater wrong to retreat within that refuge, when the same principle of duty bids you rule your people. What code of morality can justify your holding a hermit's staff when the unanimous voice of a whole empire urges you to take up the monarch's sceptre ?”

Rama replied, with the same imperturbable coolness : “ I will tell you how it is. Years and years ago, before you or I or any of us was born, when our late father married your mother, Kekayi, he made a promise to her father that the prince born of this wedlock should

succeed to the throne of Kosala. Then, some years after the marriage, the king granted two boons to your mother, any two that she might choose to ask. Now, when she demanded, first, that you should be recognised as heir-apparent in preference to me, and, secondly, that I should be sent away to banishment for fourteen years, do you mean to assert that the king should have given her a refusal,—should have proved false to his own word of honour? Our father sacrificed his life at the altar of Truth, and shall we, his sons, cast unjust aspersions on his sacred memory? Go back home, and do your duty; accept the crown and rule the country in the name of Truth and Justice.”

At this stage of the dialogue, the conversation was interrupted by a learned sophist, named Jabali, who had come with the party of Bharata to add the force of logical reasoning to that of brotherly entreaty. He was a master of the art of casuistry, and could by sheer attempts at mystification cloud and darken the clearest reason. He now said to Rama: “You have surely passed that stage when copy-book precepts are held to be as sacred as the so-called golden rules of morality which serve so admirably to warp our judgment

and to misdirect our steps. What are love and friendship but transitory relationships created by the imagination, and sanctified by the blind usage of blind man? Man comes into the world alone and friendless, and departs from the world alone and friendless; and is this not enough to indicate the true value of friendship? The father and the mother love their offspring with a love which is as valueless as it is blind, a love the origin of which depends upon what is after all a mere accident,—for no man or woman hath in him or in her the power to beget children. And when the relationship of parent and child—which the world regards as the most sacred of all earthly ties—rests on such a slender basis, what is the value of lesser kinships? All kinship with the earth or earth's is of the nature of casual acquaintance, such as a traveller makes in his journey from one place to another. Things acquire a value by the accumulation of imaginary attributes, each of which, if analysed, is found ultimately to consist of mere vapour. And, for the sake of such a vapour, a mere empty breath, thou hast foregone thy throne and thy empire, and submitted thyself to the pain of living in this uncomfortable dwelling, when the most luxurious

palace is inviting thee so insistentlly. And if the word of the living Dasaratha was but an empty breath, as I have proved, what is the worth of that word now that Dasaratha himself has turned to vapour? I sincerely pity the lot of those misguided mortals who, with a misguided sense of duty, pursue a further misguided path, until in the end, when perhaps it is too late, they discover their error and turn back only to find all retreat absolutely barred, and thus lose the chance, the sole chance of a life-time. For thou must understand that when life ends, everything ends. The Paradise that men look forward to is that unenviable nonentity, fitly called a fool's paradise, there being nothing more visionary than a hereafter, nothing more futile than offerings to the dead, which is really throwing away of much wholesome food that would otherwise feed a score of hungry mouths. The past is dead and gone, and is for ever beyond recall; the future is as uncertain as the weather; it is the present alone that is of any account; and, therefore, thou shouldst, if thou art wise, take the present moment by the forelock, leaving it to silly sophisters to weave their speculative cobwebs and lie or die

ensnared in the mazes of their own manufacture."

Rama listened with profound astonishment to this long sceptical discourse, but rising equal to the occasion, he matched it with philosophical reflections of the truest sublimity. "I have heard," said he, "with the greatest interest thy ingenious device in making the worse appear the better reason. I acknowledge that thy purpose is fair, but thy reason is as foul as falsehood itself can be. It is only a nice distinction between the man of truth and the man of specious lies—they differ not in words, but in deeds. There is such a thing as a false exterior : it is the inward man that is the true man, and, while outwardly a man's conduct might conform to the strictest standard of right and justice, inwardly his motives might be defiled with the darkest stains of infamy. Falsehood is falsehood, however gaudy a garb it may wear ; and Truth is Truth, though it may lie at the bottom of an abyss. The wider path is the one that leads to destruction, and which is visible to most eyes ; but it is the narrow path that leads to the blissful goal, which none can perceive save those from whose eyes the film of worldliness has been scraped off by unalloyed

- devotion to Truth. It is Truth that rules the universe, and the way to it often lies through routes other than those of loquacious logic. There is something more potent than reason, for reason can silence, but scarcely convince, and that more powerful agent is Faith, which can turn an entity into nonentity, and a nonentity into the veriest of verities. And faith and reason are mostly at war with each other, and not until a man has shaken himself free from the fetters of arid discussion and debate, can he enjoy that genial liberty which comes from simple faith. Let me dwell contented in my prison-house of narrow faith; I do not aspire after your vaunted paradise of reason. Pardon me if I prefer to reside in my empty vapour, and leave thy substantial granite to thyself: I am better satisfied with the breath of truth than thou art with the solid fare of thy sophistry. In a word, I shall stick to my promise, and obey my father's word of command, without caring for the vain splendours of sovereignty."

Bharata knew from his own experience that if there was any force that might prevail upon Rama, it was not the force of argument, but the force of affection, of loving entreaty, of tender

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appeals. Hence he made one more attempt to overcome Rama with the aid of the weapons of the heart. "O Rama," said he, "thou hast ever been a man of mercy, and mercy overrides every consideration of truth and justice. Therefore I pray thee, for my sake, for the sake of thy loving mother, for the sake of thy loyal people, do thou consent to accompany me back to Ayodhya." And with these words, he fell down at Rama's feet and clasped them with both arms in a passion of entreaty. The sight of brotherly tears drew forth tears from Rama's eyes also,—tears of helpless anguish at the thought that it was beyond his power to accede to Bharata's entreaties. For a time he stood speechless, not knowing what to say, for he had said all that he had to say, and that, too, in the strongest manner and with frequent repetition. At last he spoke out, "O Bharata, thou art wise, virtuous, and courageous; let not thy affection make thee blind to the fact that I have no option but to stay where I am, that I have no will but to abide by the will of my revered sire, that I have no duty except to obey his high behest. Thou art a prince of noble soul, of stainless virtue, of matchless valour, and thou canst rule thy father's realm

as the great Dasaratha himself did, with the aid of his ancient ministers ; and I am sure the subjects will feel as happy under thy new sceptre, as in the days of old. Ask me no more ; the sun may fade away, the Himalaya may lose his crown of snow, the ocean may shrink into a petty pool, but Rama cannot withdraw from his promise, nor swerve from his duty. Therefore, I say, urge me no more : drive me not to desperation."

Bharata was now utterly helpless. He plainly perceived that it was no use urging a fruitless appeal, and that nothing on earth had power to change Rama's resolution to do his duty. He therefore solicited another boon, and asked Rama to give him some token of his brotherly love, some token of his sovereignty, for him to cherish during those long years of his absence in the woods. "Let me," said he, "take off those sandals from thy feet, so that I might place them on thy throne as an emblem of thy mighty rule, and as a loving memento of thy undying affection. Those wooden sandals will voice forth thy honoured will among thy loyal people, and serve as a beacon to thy humble regent to guide his footsteps in his sole duty of obeying that will."

Rama gladly cast off the sandals from his feet, and made them over to Bharata, finding much relief at the thought of having arrived at some sort of settlement which satisfied Bharata and at the same time saved him from the killing pain of listening to proposals for deviating from the path of duty. Bharata held the sandals to his bosom, and, in a tone of the saddest solemnity said, "It is not alone you, my banished brother, that will wear the bark and matted hair of an anchorite : your humble vassal, Bharata, will henceforth adopt the same forest costume, and dwell, not indeed in the woods, but as a hermit at home. I will not eat any food but fruit and berries, and will sleep on the bare ground, passing my time in prayer and penance, until the fourteen years of thy exile are past, and until I have restored to thee thy throne, and thy empire, which I will henceforth hold like a sacred trust."

Bharata and his party then returned to Ayodhya with a heavy heart, and the loyal subjects who had begun to hope for Rama's return were doomed to a second disappointment, as keen as the sorrow they had felt at Rama's departure for the woods.

CHAPTER IX.

In the woods of Panchavati.

On his return from Chitrakuta, Bharata seriously turned himself into an anchorite, disdaining not only the palace and the throne, but even to reside in the capital. In a village bordering upon the confines of Ayodhya, named Nandigram, he built himself a lowly hut, and took up his lonely residence there, vowing not to enter the city until Rama's return. From there he directed the affairs of the state as a regent, taking no active part, but only keeping a watchful eye on the course of events, so as to guard the interests of the subjects and the traditions of the royal house of Raghu.

Bharata's visit, however, had one other effect on Rama's mind, besides reviving memories of happy home: it made him alive to the fear of his being occasionally disturbed by tender solicitations from affectionate kinsmen and loyal subjects. Chitrakuta, he found, was so inconveniently near his home that he felt there was

every likelihood of such intrusions breaking in upon his peace every now and then. He therefore determined to migrate into the deeper forest region of Dandaka, far to the south, where he hoped to be immune from such sad scenes as he had to witness at Chitrakuta. By slow marches, the party penetrated the depths of the wild woods, seeking for the hermitage of a sage known to them as residing in that trackless wilderness. As they travelled onward and onward, they were struck with rapt admiration for the romantic beauty of the southern woodlands, with their pathless mazes of bush and briar, their countless clumps of towering trees, their darksome depths of rank and dank vegetation, their plenteous profusion of buds and blossoms, and fruits and berries. In many a secluded bower they discerned the huts of saintly sages who had renounced the vanities of the world to seek the verities of heaven. At each of these they made inquiries after Saint Agastya, of whose fame they had already heard so much. At last, they discovered a hermitage, where Saint Atri had his abode, and from him they received such a hearty invitation to stay, that it was impossible to decline. The holy man and his holy spouse, did all they could

to minister to their guests' comforts, the latter of whom was particularly pleased with Sita, to whom she made presents of costly jewellery,—jewellery, that alas ! was pathetically misplaced in that lonely forest, even though it decked the person of a figure as lovely as man's eyes had ever gazed upon. After staying for a day at Saint Atri's hermitage, the exiles moved on to the cottage of Agastya, where also their stay was brief. Agastya made some valuable presents to Rama,—a mighty bow of wondrous workmanship, a deadly dart shining like a tongue of flame, a quiver amply stocked with sharp-pointed arrows, and a stately sabre encased in a sheath of burnished gold—saying, “ Take these weapons : let them be thy companions : thou shalt have need for them : with their aid thou shalt meet and smite thy foemen hip and thigh.”

By the advice of Saint Agastya, Rama moved on into the deeper regions of that forest, and built himself a leafy hut in an open tract of wooded surroundings, known as Panchavati. The place was situated on the banks of the Godavari, and seemed to outmatch all neighbouring spots in the romantic colouring of its scenery. And in this fair spot Rama passed months and years

in the domestic companionship of Sita and Lakshmana. The dancing ripples of the Godavari reminded him of the wayward waters of the Sarayu ; the breeze sighing among the trees seemed to bring him soft whispers from his distant home ; the evening sunset called forth a fleeting recollection of ancient Ayodhya. It so happened one day that a Rakshasa maiden, named Surpanakha, a sister of Ravana, the Rakshasa King of Lanka, was passing by the cottage door of Rama, and she accidentally caught a glimpse of the handsome hermit brothers. The woods of Panchavati were oft frequented by hordes of Rakshasa tribes, who in their peregrinations from Lanka had to pass through the forest regions of Southern India, and in doing so they pounced upon whatever human prey they could lay their hands on. Surpanakha was a young cannibal woman wandering with a herd of her own species, among whom were two of her brothers, named Khara and Dushana. As she peeped into Rama's face she was inflamed with the fire of lust, to such a degree that all alone she stepped up to Rama and Lakshmana, and addressing the former said, " Who art thou that, clad in hermit's vestments, art wandering in this desolate forest,

followed by a young man and a young woman, and armed with a mighty bow ? Knowest thou not that this forest is the stronghold of Rakshasas, who frequent its gloomy glades and exercise their rights of sovereignty over man and beast, and rock and tree ? Tell me, who thou art, roaming thus forlorn and friendless."

Rama did not like the lustful looks of the lewd woman, but he was not in the least touched with fear to hear that she was a Rakshasa, or that the forest was haunted by tribes of her kind. It was impossible for him to tell an untruth, nor was there any necessity for disguising his identity. Rama, therefore, freely related the whole story of his name, descent, and exile, and asked her, in his turn, who she was. Surpanakha replied that she was the sister of Ravana, King of Lanka, and that she had four other brothers, Kumbhakarna, Bibhishana, Khara, and Dushana, the last two of whom were accompanying her in her rambles through the forest. She then made a shameless avowal of her liking for Rama, saying, "Look at my beauty, O pretty mortal ! Many a sighing suitor has gazed upon my charms with longing eyes, but I have disdained their overtures without casting a glance back at them. But thee I am

willing to choose as my lord and husband, and thou shouldst deem thyself fortunate in having conquered my maiden fortress so easily."

Rama made a ready reply: "Many thanks for thy tender offers; but I regret I am already married to yonder lady (pointing to Sita), who possesses my untiring, unswerving devotion. Give me up as a hopeless bargain."

But Surpanakha promptly answered, "Cast thy human wife aside, and choose a queen worthy of thy kingly valour. Yonder woman is a pale and ugly creature, a sickly misshapen dwarf, scarcely worthy a warrior's wife: I will just devour her, and clear her from thy path, and free thy hand to take another and a better spouse. I am mistress of a rich and boundless empire, which I will share with thee, and we two shall wander over hill and dale, through glen and gorge, enjoying each other's love with a fulness and a freedom thou canst never know from such a weakling woman as yonder morsel of humanity."

Rama now adopted a tone of light banter, in replying to the Rakshasa woman: "Listen, O beauteous woman! Sita is my wedded wife, knit to me by the holy ties of matrimony: and she is an exceedingly jealous woman; and, with

such a rival, thy love will constantly be cribbed, cabined, and confined. But I have another proposal to make in lieu of thine: my brother, Lakshmana, has no wife following him, and he is a handsome young man; thou hadst better have him for thy lord and husband. Say, now, dost thou agree, and shall I proceed with the negotiation?"

Blinded by her passion, Surpanakha turned her eyes on Lakshmana and gazed wistfully at his face. But before she could speak out her love, Lakshmana said, "No; would it be meet for a maiden of such matchless beauty to be the wife of a mere slave, such as I? Thou probably dost not know that I am only a vassal of Rama's, a mere bondman, a bounden slave; and it would ill beseem thy queenly dignity and thy peerless grace to match thyself with one of such humble position. Better thou shouldst be Rama's younger consort, Rama's favourite wife; thy superior beauty will soon cast Sita's faded lustre into the shade, and thou shalt usurp sole supremacy over his royal heart and over his royal household."

Surpanakha now began to see through all this raillery, and, in a tone of fierce anger, inflamed further by unrequited passion, she said, "Is this

a conspiracy to insult me? Dost thou really mean to give the palm of superiority to the pallid features of that contemptible creature, thy poor partner? Beware the wrath of an enraged Rakshasa,—beware the fangs of a trodden serpent. I will devour that lump of female flesh, and teach thee the way to behave better with our kind.”

So saying, Surpanakha darted at Sita, with intent to devour her; and Sita fell back in terror, and hid herself behind Lakshmana, while the Rakshasa woman stormed and screamed in savage fury, and Rama began to repent of his having adopted a style of jesting in his conversation with her. Lakshmana, at the same time, leaped forward to ward off the intended attack on Sita, and in one moment, with one sweep of his scimitar, he cleft off the nose and both ears of the Rakshasa woman, who ran away shrieking frantically and swearing vengeance.

She ran away to where her brothers, Khara and Dushana, were sitting at a cannibal dinner, far away in the dark depths of the woods. Her bleeding face, her blood-stained garments, and her plaintive cries, roused the hearts of the Rakshasa brothers to a pitch of intense indignation, and

leaving their meal unfinished, they proceeded to muster together a band of followers to direct an immediate attack on Rama and Lakshmana. Nor were Rama and Lakshmana incautious of the threatening danger. As soon as Surpanakha had fled away, they brought out their arms and stood on their guard, fearing an instantaneous onset. In a moment they espied a herd of yelling monsters, hurrying in the direction of their cottage; and the next moment they ran forward to meet their attack half-way, so as at least to save Sita from the terror of listening to the noise of battle hurtling in the air. The Rakshasa band, though numerous, was after all a rude rabble, enfeebled by riotous living, and it cost the princes no great effort to slay their chieftains and disperse their numbers, though the bloodshed was immense and the time occupied long.

CHAPTER X.

Sita Lost.

It is a law of conduct, not only among human beings, but also, it would seem, among the Rakshasas of old, that when force fails, cunning is the inevitable resort. This was exactly the line of action chosen by Surpanakha when, maddened by pain and mutilated in body, she hastened back to Lanka and poured into the ears of her royal brother the tale of her woes. "The Southern woods," she said, "in which we have so long roamed at large, and which we had by ancient undisturbed usance converted into a Rakshasa colony, are now dominated by two youthful princes of some royal house, called Kosala,—one of these named Rama, the other Lakshmana. They are accompanied by a woman of uncommon beauty—an exquisitely modelled figure, well-proportioned limbs of rosy hue, a complexion I can compare only with the moon's, and a pair of eyes sparkling like the most brilliant gems that adorn thy diadem. These two princes

are of wondrous might, and, it seems, they are marching straight towards thy kingdom, crushing down all opposition in their way, and even inflicting wanton cruelties on defenceless women,—witness my own mangled features, and the corpses of our valiant brothers, Khara and Dushana, both of whom were slain in an encounter with them. O King, thou must avenge the death of these brothers, even though thou mayest do nothing to avenge an outraged sister, who is pleading not her own cause, but the cause of her murdered brothers,—*thy* brothers, brought up with thee under the self-same roof! She pleads also for the safety of thy kingdom and the honour of thy kingly house. And then, O Ravana, the woman that follows Rama is a beauty such as thine eyes have never beheld, a jewel fit to be treasured in the harem of a mighty monarch like thyself.”

The lewd desire to capture this lauded beauty acted as a more powerful incentive in the mind of Ravana than the desire to wreak revenge for the murder of his brothers, or the alleged outrage of his sister. He therefore decided upon a project of deception rather than a plan of open fight. Indeed, he shunned open war, not only because

it was likely to fail in his intended object of kidnapping Sita, but also because he had himself witnessed some superhuman feats of strength performed by the young princes in the woods of Dandaka, and he was consequently suspicious of success in an open engagement with them. So, crossing over to the mainland, he summoned one of his vassals, named Maricha, and disclosed to him his whole plan of operations. Maricha expressed his willingness to obey the royal command, but there was a note of warning in his assent, as he said, "Far be it from me to question the royal will : I should rather deem it an honour to lay down my life in serving my king ; but I feel it to be my duty to forewarn you of the consequences. I have seen Rama ; I have been a witness to his singular skill and courage in battle ; his strength is above that of man or devil ; I myself could scarcely stand against him for a quarter of an hour ; and even now, the bare mention of his name makes each individual hair of mine stand on end. His brother Lakshmana is still more terrible, if such were possible. Beware of courting needless danger, of waking up a sleeping lion."

Ravana felt the force of Maricha's arguments,

but did not like his manner of stating them. Candour is the one quality that a despotic monarch cannot tolerate. Ravana's face, therefore, flamed up with wrath as he replied, "Spare thy cold-blooded counsels for other ears : I cannot brook such open criticism : it smacks too much of disloyalty. Thou must obey my mandate, without murmur or demur, or else thou must perish a victim of my displeasure. Choose either of two courses—pleasure or pain, the pleasure of enjoying the favour of thy sovereign, or the pain of speedy death at the point of my sword."

Maricha replied, "I will obey ; but I feel it to be my duty to explain to you the real situation in another way. It is not I that is disloyal, but he who put the idea of this enterprise into your head. But it is the irony of royal fortunes frequently to confound between outspoken friends and masquerading foes. I cannot presume to call myself a friend of your majesty, but I do feel most strongly that this lewd project of stealing a married woman and hurrying her off into captivity, is utterly unworthy of a king, thoroughly debasing even to a man of much humbler station, and one of the foulest sins in the eyes of God. Nevertheless, I will do thy bidding."

With these words, Maricha transformed himself into the shape of a deer of matchless beauty, and bounded away in the direction of Sita's cottage, browsing the herbs which grew around in tasteful profusion. Sita saw the deer, and thinking it to be what it looked, was greatly struck by its branching antlers, its golden haunches, and the sapphire spots upon its sleek skin. Calling to Lakshmana, she directed his attention to the lovely beast, exclaiming how lovely it was, and expressing her admiration of its beauty in a quick succession of rapturous phrases. Lakshmana, however, could not share her feelings, and said that the seeming deer was probably some rude Rakshasa in disguise ; for, he added, such trickery and deception were part of the regular policy pursued by the barbarian tribes infesting those forest regions, with the avowed purpose of exterminating whatever signs of civilised life might be discovered there. But Sita would not listen to caution ; she thought that Lakshmana was only giving her an evasion, and this made her all the more eager to have the animal caught alive, so that she might bring it up as a pet. Lakshmana again replied, " Believe me, my Lady, it cannot be a deer : there is no species of deer of

this strange shape anywhere in existence ; it must be some ruthless Rakshasa, wearing that tantalising shape to lead us into a trap."

But Sita would not listen still. She now made an appeal to Rama : " Gracious lord,—I should like very much to have that lovely deer : I have never seen an animal of such rare beauty in a forest full of rare beauties. I would have that dear creature caught alive and brought to our cottage to be a companion of my solitude, during those long intervals when yourself and Lakshmana are away hunting in the woods or otherwise engaged. And when we shall go back to Ayodhya, I shall take that creature with me, and it will dwell in my chamber, and live as a domestic pet, reminding us of our forest days, our romantic life in the woods of Panchavati. If, however, it be impossible to capture it alive, I must at least have its skin, and use it as a carpet ; and it will be a carpet worthy of a royal palace."

Rama consented ; and, bidding Lakshmana stay beside Sita, ran in pursuit of the deer. In a moment, both pursuer and pursued were lost to sight in the depths of the forest. Not long after that, a cry of " Help ! my brother ! help ! "

rang through the air ; and Sita trembled with fear at the thought that some woeful mischance had befallen her lord. She bitterly repented of her folly in asking her husband to go into the forest interior, in chase of a mere brute ; and she asked Lakshmana to hasten to his brother's relief. Lakshmana answered : "Fear not, honoured Lady ; nothing can harm the invincible Rama. That cry of help was an illusion, as deceptive as the shape of deer that presented itself before your eyes : it must be the trick of some wily Rakshasa, intended to entice me away from your side. Let me assure you once more that no power on earth can do the least injury to the redoubtable Rama. You must remember that since we slew the Rakshasa leaders, Khara and Dushana, their followers have been busy employing every art of cunning and deception to outwit their foes, whom they could not overcome by open war. Do not give way to womanish fear : that cry cannot be Rama's."

Seized as she was by a chilling fear, Sita was cut to the quick by Lakshmana's refusal to hasten to his brother's help, in a situation which she thought to be one of grave peril. She therefore burst forth into an exclamation of mingled anger

and reproach, saying, "Dost thou look upon my husband's danger with a cold and callous heart? There is no deception in that cry which we have heard: the deception is in thy own heart; thou art inly wishing the death of thy elder to force his widow's hand into thine by a treachery, which thou didst first nestle in thy breast when first thou didst follow thy brother's footsteps to this lonesome forest! O! the treachery of near kinsmen, how they hide the basest designs under a cloak of crafty compassion,—how they conceal the shaft of death in their brotherly bosom! Know this, once for all,—thy hopes are as vain as thy purpose is foul: Sita is faithful to her lord in every pore of her skin, and she shall follow him both in life and in death!"

Lakshmana's body trembled from head to foot with anger, at these reproachful words,—words more cruel, more undeserved than he had ever heard. Stung by the biting taunt, he could not refrain a tear, but he did refrain from retaliating in similar language. He only said, "Thou art unto me not only a queen, not only an elder's wife, not only like a mother, but also like a goddess; and, therefore, I must refrain from answering thy wrathful censure in a

wrathful tone. But this I must tell thee—and I am speaking with the coolest deliberation—that female faith does not rest on very strong foundations, and that the female tongue is peculiarly prone to deal in venomous words. And the words that have just dropped from thy lips, O Lady, are as venomous as human words can ever be: they have poisoned my whole being; but yet, let me tell thee, with all the emphasis that can attach to vocal expression, that my heart is as free from treachery as it is pure from sinful thought. Bear witness, ye powers of the upper spheres, ye unseen dwellers of the wood, ye earth and air, that Lakshmana's motives are absolutely unalloyed by any baser elements than the simple duty of obeying his elder's mandate and staying by Sita's side, to guard her person from possible danger. Bear witness, ye heavens, that I have ever been dutiful to my king and queen, but now my loyalty stands challenged, my faith called in question, my services cast in the dust. Well, Lady, I shall disobey my brother's mandate and obey thy voice of unmerited wrath; I am going to where my brother has gone in pursuit of the deceptive deer; may the deities of the forest guard thee during our absence!"

With this prayer, Lakshmana wended his way towards the interior of the forest, in quest of Rama. Just as he had left the cottage, Ravana, who was screened behind a neighbouring bush, emerged from his hiding, and approached the door of Sita's hut in the garb of a holy mendicant. Mute Nature stood still in awe at that unhappy moment ; the breeze fell off ; the forest trees stared grim and gloomy ; and the river Godavari herself paused in solemn silence ! Clad in the sacred vestments of a recluse, Ravana stood quietly at the door, as if his mind were directed to divine contemplation, as if he had come to solicit a dole of alms. Sita saw him stand, and thinking him to be a Brahman mendicant, asked him what he wanted. But Ravana, not answering her question, launched into a flattering speech in praise of her beauty, saying, " Gifted with such divine beauty, dressed in the simplicity of sylvan attire, tell me who thou art,—goddess of Beauty or of Fertility or of Fortune. How thy teeth of pearly whiteness shine through thy lips of coral ; how thy eyes sparkle with a lustre that is surely not of this earth ! How slim and graceful is thy peerless person ; how softly-rounded thy shapely arms

and legs; how tender-heaving that beauteous bosom; how slender-moulded that lovely waist, which seems to invite the encircling arms of love around it! It cannot be that such a radiant form is a mortal: tell me if thou art a goddess or a fairy or an angel; and why thou dost dwell in these solitary woods, alone and seemingly friendless, when dreadful dangers surround thee in crowds. Why dost thou reside in this lonely hut, when a royal hall would be a meetter home for thee? Why dost thou wear these clothes of bark, when jewelled attire would be thy fitter raiment? Let me entreat thee, O glorious goddess of the woodlands, do not frustrate thy destiny which has marked thee out for being a monarch's consort."

Sita, not suspecting any harm, frankly replied, "I am the daughter of King Janaka of Videha, and the wife of Rama, prince of Ayodhya. When Dasaratha, King of Ayodhya, was about to retire from the world, he nominated my husband as regent, and a public ceremony in honour of that event was about to be performed when Queen Kekayi, his youngest Rani, claimed an old, forgotten boon, and the promise-bound monarch decreed that my husband should go into

banishment for fourteen years, and Kekayi's son, Bharata, should sit upon the throne. Ever dutiful, ever truthful, Rama meekly obeyed the royal will, and his faithful brother, Lakshmana, and myself have followed him into exile. This, O holy man, is the brief story of my fortune. Now, rest thee awhile in this humble but hospitable hut, until the princes have returned from their hunting and thou canst share our simple repast with them. Meanwhile, take rest in our little cottage, and tell me from what great saint thou art descended, and wherefore thou choosest to wander alone in this pathless forest."

Ravana replied, "I am neither a recluse nor a Rishi, but the king of Lanka and the captain-general of the Rakshasa forces. The whole world quakes beneath my lordly tread, and the upper and nether kingdoms both obey my will and crouch beneath my unconquerable spirit. But thou alone of all created things hast conquered my heart,—thy ethereal beauty has ravished me completely, and lo ! I have come unto thee in the garb of a mendicant to beg thy love ! Come, and be a sharer of my empire, a partaker of my glory, a partner of my joys and triumphs. Many a proud queen, many a bright-eyed mistress

surrounds me in my imperial harem, and thou shalt be the empress over them all, the queen of all my queens and mistresses. My capital, Lanka, encompassed by the sea, is the crowned queen of all cities and towns, and is built on the crest of a towering mountain-peak, overlooking leagues and leagues on every side ; and thou shalt be the fair owner of all this fair territory ; and thou shalt walk hand in hand with thy Ravana, through the walks and alleys of the palace-garden, redolent with the perfume of flowers, and refreshed by gusts of moist breezes blowing from the sea. And five thousand gaily-dressed damsels shall wait upon thee, ready to attend thy beck and call. Quit, quit these gloomy gorges of the Godavari, and come with me and occupy my blissful mansions."

Sita's eyes flashed fire as she listened to Ravana, and with her whole frame trembling with rage, she replied in a tone breathing the utmost scorn, "Avaunt, thou deceitful knave ! Know that I am the lawfully-wedded wife of Rama, the valiant warrior, the peerless prince, the ideal man. Know that Rama is my lord and husband, he whose name is enough to carry death and dismay into the ranks of his enemies. Surely a cruel

curse has lighted upon thy doomed head, else why shouldst thou come all the way from Lanka to court destruction at the hands of my lord. Better thou shouldst hurl thyself into the ocean-foam from the top of some steep promontory, than that thou shouldst entertain the faintest fancy of winning Sita. Better thou shouldst fling thy carnal carcase into a big conflagration and perish in a moment, than that thou shouldst conceive even a fleeting thought of stealing Sita. Avaunt ! Take to thy heels, if thou dost value thy safety."

Ravana simply smiled at her threats, and unheeding her wild gesticulations, caught hold of her raven tresses, and with the other arm circling round her waist, lifted her up from the ground, and bore her away to where, a few steps off, his chariot was waiting for him. Vainly did she throw about her arms and legs ; vainly did she shriek and shout ; vainly did she struggle to escape. She was caught in an iron grip from which it was impossible to get loose. The royal chariot rattled with whirlwind speed, and in the twinkling of an eye, the cottage door, the thatched roof, the garden trees, all disappeared in the dim distance. No threats, no cries, no entreaties were of any avail against the ruthless wrath of

Ravana, who held her fast with one powerful arm, while with the other he urged his coursers to the swiftest gallop.

It was not long before Sita's feeble resistance relaxed into a piteous wail, in which she addressed the trees, the streams, the mountain-peaks, the valleys, the birds and beasts that she met on the way, praying to each to tell her Rama that his Sita had been snatched away by the Rakshasa Ravana. There was of course no attempt at rescue, except a futile one made by Jatayu, king of the vultures, who fought with his sharp beak and bloody talons, trying to intercept the path of the vile seducer; but Ravana dashed off the wings of the audacious bird, and sped on his way, as resistless as ever. Faint and faltering as she was with terror, Sita had sufficient presence of mind to cast off her jewels one by one on the way to indicate the path pursued by her captor, in case a search party should start to discover her whereabouts. At last, the celestial car of Ravana reached the gates of Lanka, where Sita was put up in a garden, called Asoka, and kept in confinement under a terrible guard of Rakshasa females.

CHAPTER XI.

The Search for Sita.

While Sita was being hurried away into captivity, Rama was slowly returning from his chase of the phantom deer. About half-way from the cottage he met Lakshmana advancing towards him. His first impulse was one of anger at the thought that Lakshmana had broken his command, and leaving Sita unguarded, had wandered into the forest, merely perhaps to partake of the excitement of the chase. But seeing a curious cloud of gloom settled on his face, Rama's anger changed to alarm, and he asked him what the matter was. Lakshmana told him that he had been sent into the forest by Sita, who was frightened out of her wits at the sound of a cry of help, which she supposed issued from her husband's lips and signified to her mind some grave peril into which he had fallen. "And didn't you tell her," asked Rama in a tone of light reproof, "that the cry was as illusory as the apparition, I myself was sent

to chase ? ” “ I did,” replied Lakshmana with emphasis, “ and I further told her that I could not on any account leave her unguarded, for I had clear orders from you not to leave my post until your return. And at this she accused me of secret treachery, insinuating things that I would not bring on the tongue, even for purposes of a report. I was thus obliged to leave her alone and start in search of you.”

Rama's face turned pale with dread. He had himself been the dupe of one illusion, and here was his brother, the dupe of a second. All this must be the thin meshes of a wide-spreading net laid by the wily Rakshasas, who, failing to conquer by force, were resorting to stratagem to accomplish their devices. A train of ominous apprehensions passed through his mind and quickened his paces; and, when he reached the cottage, he had hardly breath enough to call out to Sita. But Sita was nowhere to be seen; within, without, around, here, there, and everywhere did they search and shout; but there was no trace of Sita, no response to their voice, except its reduplication by the forest echoes. Rama's head grew dizzy, and he sat at the threshold of the cottage door, lamenting for absent Sita. “ All is, indeed, lost ! ”

he cried in his anguish, "the villains have at last overpowered me. They have carried off Sita, or, worse still, have devoured her. Ah me ! why did I listen to her words and go in chase of that phantom deer ? O brother ! our days on earth are done. Let Bharata know that I will return to Ayodhya no more, but pass the entire remainder of my life in this desolate jungle."

The two brothers searched every nook and corner, every grove and avenue, every hill and dale of those extensive forests, in the hope of being able to light upon some clue that might ultimately lead to her discovery ; but there was neither trace nor footprint to help even a conjecture about the mysterious disappearance. At last, Rama and Lakshmana came upon the spot where the vulture-king, Jatayu, was grasping out his life, with his pinions struck off, and with his crest kissing the ground. This was the first living wight that they had come across, and him they, therefore, questioned whether he had seen a married lady borne away or otherwise treated by some Rakshasa. Jatayu first called for a drink of water, and when a few drops of moisture were trickled into his throat, he told them that Sita had been carried away in a chariot

by the Rakshasa king, Ravana, whom he had tried to intercept, with the result that he was now dying. But whither he had taken Sita, was more than he could say. And after this, speech failed the dying creature, and he gave up his breath, entrusting his own remains to the pious care of Rama. The two brothers then duly consigned the body of Jatayu to the flames, and proceeded further in quest of Sita. Soon they came upon the Nilgiri mountains, through the caverns and gorges of which they made a careful search, in the thought that they might find, if not the living Sita, at least her lifeless corpse or even perhaps her bleached bones. But there was not even the shadow of a trace anywhere to be seen or discerned. Slowly and sadly they still pursued their search, and after many a day of weary wandering, many a night of sleepless anxiety, they discovered in a deep cavern of the Malaya mountains two dark human figures, whom, in their eager expectation, they perhaps first suspected to be Sita and her thievish captor. Calling out to them, they were answered by a voice of woe, saying, "I am Sugriva, the crownless king of the Vanars, and this other is Hanumana, my faithful henchman, and two more

miserable mortals thou shalt not find in the three worlds."

Rama wondered who this voice might be, and whether this might not be another of those baffling illusions which had made him once more a houseless wanderer. Further interrogation cleared the mystery, and Rama found in Sugriva a banished and defrauded king, knit to him by the common bonds of sorrow. Sugriva had been the king of Kishkindha, but had been driven out from his throne by his intriguing brother, Bali, who had not only seized the kingdom, but also forced his wife to his bed. Rama and Sugriva soon became fast friends, and to cement this alliance they went through the ceremony of swearing everlasting amity at the altar. It was settled that Rama should first assist Sugriva in winning back his kingdom, and then Sugriva was to lend him troops to go about in search of Sita and to make war, should war prove a necessary step in the recovery of the lost lady.

Shortly afterwards, Rama and Lakshmana, accompanied by their new allies, Sugriva and Hanumana, proceeded to the city of Kishkindha, and sent a formal challenge of war to the tyrant Bali. Bali was roused to intense anger at this

presumptuous challenge from one who was now nothing but a helpless fugitive, and flaring with wrath he exclaimed that the shortest way of putting a final end to such intrusions would be to despatch Sugriva to his last reckoning. But his queen, Tara, tried to appease his wrath, and advised greater circumspection, saying, "My lord,—that proud defiance cannot be a mere *brutum fulmen* ; Sugriva must have some powerful ally at his back, some mighty comrade with whom he must have entered into alliance to make war upon you. Recently, you remember, we heard of two princes come from Ayodhya to pass their days in the forest ; and these princes are said to be absolutely matchless in the art of war. Perchance, Sugriva has enlisted their sympathy and elicited their promise of support ; and if that be the case, as I shrewdly suspect, it is utterly vain to wage an unrighteous war and attempt to maintain by brute bloodshed what was originally gained by base fraud. Take my advice ; make thy peace with Sugriva ; welcome him into thy city like a brother ; and do not try to involve thy kingdom in the horrors of a fraternal war."

Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown ;
but if the crown be one that has been seized by

unlawful means, the uneasiness is so painful as to drive the head mad. And so exactly was the usurper Bali. He defied the challenge ; he scorned the gentle Tara's advice ; he heeded not word of counsel spoken by his ministers, but rushed to war, without duly weighing either the consequences or the ways and means. The war that followed was brief in duration, but terrible in its slaughter. Bali's forces were mown down like field-crops in autumn ; in every part of the field the princes of Ayodhya were making their arms felt ; and it was not long before a fatal dart, hissing out from Rama's bow, pierced the breast of Bali, and in one momentous minute liberated the kingdom of Kishkindha from the greedy grasp of a terrible tyrant.

And now was Sugriva master of his own kingdom, and once more restored to his home and hearth. Hanumana prayed that Rama himself should perform the rites of consecration and installation ; and with that view he invited the two brothers to Kishkindha. But Rama answered, " Banished Rama may not enter the precincts of a peopled town, until his fourteen years of exile are over. Such is my stern task ; but thou, friend Sugriva, mayest enter into

possession of thy fair kingdom, which the merciful heavens have decreed back to thee. Take as thy chief counsellor gallant Angad, son of the slain Bali, and thy own nephew. As for the aid and assistance thou hast proffered to myself, we must wait until the rainy season is over; for during these four wet months no search parties can perform successful work, and I must bide my time peacefully in this cave, so happily vacated by thee.

So Sugriva mounted his father's throne, and spent the wet months in overhauling the administration of the country and putting his army into a state of efficiency in preparation for the campaign awaiting it in the winter. When the rains were over, Rama sent Lakshmana to Sugriva's court to demand the promised contingent of troops that were to go in quest of Sita through the length and breadth of the country. Sugriva received Lakshmana as a faithful vassal would receive his gracious overlord, and introduced him to his courtiers as the saviour of his life and the restorer of his fortune. With the heartiest assurances of loyalty, he placed the entire resources of his kingdom at the disposal of the Ayodhya princes, and, moreover, on his

own initiative, sent out four reconnoitring parties to the four quarters of the continent, Hanumana himself commanding the contingent that was ordered southwards to Lanka. Before starting he had received from Rama his wedding-ring as a token whereby to assure Sita of his *bona fides*, to convince her that there was no trickery, no treachery in his mission.

The other three parties, that had proceeded north, east, and west, all failed in their mission, Hanumana alone achieving anything like success. He travelled due south, towards Ravana's own stronghold, acting on the theory that the Rakshasa king dared not have carried Sita anywhere except to his own castle. On this assumption, Hanumana crossed the narrow sea that separates the mainland from the island of Ceylon, and lighted upon a point on the northern coast of the Rakshasa kingdom. He knew not where to go, being a perfect stranger in that strange country. Moreover, he was encompassed by danger on every side,—danger not only of open violence, which he did not fear so much, but of subtle cunning, in which art the Rakshasa had established an unenviable reputation. However, he proceeded wisely and cautiously, carefully looking

into every spot that might serve as a place of concealment. As night fell, the dangers of the day were multiplied sevenfold, and, for precaution's sake, Hanumana climbed up a tall *Asoka* tree and hid himself within its dense foliage, determining to make it his shelter for the night. From this leafy loft he cast his eyes around to see if he could discern anything that might lead to the joyful discovery. In one spot he espied the faint flicker of a light, and bending his ears attentively in that direction caught echoes of sounds wafted in the silent night air, sounds that seemed to indicate the presence of life in that lonesome locality.

He climbed down from the *Asoka* tree, and, proceeding towards the spot where the light glinted, he discovered a stately palace surrounded by tall stately trees, mostly of *Asoka*, on one of which he climbed again so as to be nearest the building, and, if possible, to ascertain by signs what was passing within, and especially, whether that edifice was the residence of Sita. It was difficult for him to discover Sita, the palace being more a prison than a residence ; but it was much easier to make his own presence known to her, in case she should be there. So, from

his leafy loft Hanumana broke forth into an extempore song relating to Ayodhya, chanting in a semi-quaver how Dasaratha was a mighty king of Kosala who banished his eldest son, Rama, for fourteen years, and then died of grief for him ; how Rama cheerfully went into exile only to obey his father's will, and how his faithful consort, Sita, and his loving brother, Lakshmana, followed him thither ; how one day a disguised Rakshasa crept to their woodland cottage and stole Sita away ; how Rama mourned disconsolately for the loss of his beloved wife ; how he met Sugriva and made an alliance with him for the purpose of rescuing Sita ; and how he himself was the henchman of Sugriva, sent purposely to discover her whereabouts, in order that an expedition might forthwith march against her cruel captor and recover her from confinement

Sita was, indeed, confined in that garden-palace. A powerful guard was placed at the gate to prevent her from carrying on any communication with the outside world, though that defence would hardly seem to have been necessary, considering that the place was so thickly wooded as to bar all egress and ingress, except perhaps through the medium of the upper atmosphere.

And it was through this aerial medium that Hanumana himself had effected his entrance into Sita's place of confinement ; and from the lofty perch on which he had taken up his quarters he could not only survey the scene as it presented itself to the eye, but also hear the weeping and wailing going on within. " Rama ! Rama ! " was the cry that pealed upon his ears oftenest ; and at times it was followed up and mingled by more coherent expressions of sorrow. " O Rama ! " she cried, " I shudder to think how thou art passing thy lonely days, bereft of me. It is thy pain that makes my present captivity so galling to me. O, hasten to my arms with wings swift as imagination, and I will make this dungeon as happy a home as the palace-towers of Ayodhya."

Hanumana listened with both ears to every accent of this joyful lamentation, and there was now no doubt left in his mind that he had discovered Sita, and that he had succeeded in his mission. He listened and pondered ; shortly, that plaintive voice rose up again " like a stream of rich distilled perfume " : " Oh ! am I doomed to waste away my years in this living grave ? O Rama, thou never couldst bear a moment's separation from me : how canst thou linger and

tarry for days and days and weeks and weeks, without a glimpse or glance from me? Thy Sita is still true to thee: of thee she raves; of thee she thinks; for thee she feels; for thee she pines. Her heart adores thy image, when her eyes cannot behold thy face; but O, how long shall thy Sita feed on shadows? I have borne pain, I have endured dishonour, I have suffered mental torture, worse, far worse than any rack can inflict; and all for thy sweet sake. It cannot be that thou hast forgotten me; it is beyond all thought that thou has forsaken me. Why then are thy steps now faltering? Why dost thou not ride on the wings of vengeance and swoop upon thy foe and set me free?"

And when Hanumana's song entered her ears during a spell of tearful silence, she seemed to gather life once more. She sat up in her bed, and pricked her ears to listen. It was the time of night; the overgrowth of vegetation round about her dwelling had made the darkness thicker; she could see nothing; she was dizzy and dazed with pain and watching; and she thought that song was only a hallucination, a deceitful dream. Many times had she dreamt of Rama; many times had visions of rescue appeared before

her eyes, only to make her real situation come home to her with all the greater poignancy of grief. And she thought she was once again the unwary victim of one such illusion more. But still she listened, plunged in thought ; and when that song in the air ceased, she said to herself, "Is it again one of those deluding dreams that have tantalised me so oft and added to my torture ?"

Hanumana now got his opportunity ; and, sliding down from his leafy seat, he crawled up to the prison-door, and said, as though in answer to Sita's question, "No ; it is not a dream, but a reality. I have come as a messenger from thy own Rama, and my credentials are with me." And he took out from his pouch a richly jewelled ring, the wedding-ring of Rama, inscribed with his name in unmistakeable characters. Sita took the ring, and for one moment her swimming eyes were unable to decipher the inscription ; her trembling hands could not keep the ring steadily before her eyes. But still the mere sight of the ring somehow drove home to her heart the conviction that there was no illusion ; and for the first time since she came into captivity she felt a thrill of joy, such as she had never felt since that

bright bridal morn when, with a beaming smile, she had thrown the bridal garland around the neck of her chosen suitor. She held the dear token in her hand, and gazed and gazed, as if to assure herself that her eyes were not deluding her. Her very emotions made articulation impossible, and condensed speech to tears.

When, after a few moments, she recovered herself, all she could speak was, "Bringer of Rama's love ! bearer of Rama's token !" —as if that were an object belonging to the furthest realms of unreality, as if such an individual were the veriest of imaginary personages. "Ay—noble Lady, I do come from Rama," replied Hanumana, to steady her wavering faith. It was some time before her sceptic heart could be persuaded to believe that she had indeed received a genuine message from her own Rama ; for she was in that state of shattered faith, when assurance lingers tardily at the threshold of the mind. At last when her subsiding emotions released reason from its fetters, she said to Hanumana, "How shall I welcome thee, trusty envoy from my Rama ? Prisoner as I am, I am beggarly even in my courtesy. Thou art not a common messenger,—thou art a Heaven-winged angel ! thou hast

her eyes, only to make her real situation come home to her with all the greater poignancy of grief. And she thought she was once again the unwary victim of one such illusion more. But still she listened, plunged in thought ; and when that song in the air ceased, she said to herself, "Is it again one of those deluding dreams that have tantalised me so oft and added to my torture ?"

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accomplished what the bravest mortal would have quivered to conceive. Thou hast crossed the boundless ocean which obeys no monarch's will ; thou hast braved the lion in his own den. Tell me, is Rama safe and well ? Is Lakshmana following him faithfully like a brother ? What steps are they taking to rescue me from captivity ? Does Rama grieve for his absent Sita disconsolately ? Has he received news from Ayodhya ? Has he sent word to Bharata, asking him to move his army towards Lanka ? Is he himself hastening towards Lanka ? ”

Hanumana was not a little confused by this voluble variety of interrogatives, and, not being able to borrow Gragantua's mouth, he answered briefly, “ Believe me, noble Lady, Rama shall soon be here to liberate thee from this confinement. His forces are already marching hitherwards, and Rama has made a solemn vow not to take rest until he has slain Ravana and devastated his kingdom. If, however, thy patience cannot serve thee until then, thou mayest, if so thou wilt, go back with me at once, and I'll warrant thy safe journey upon the same honour which Rama trusted in entrusting me with this mission.”

But Sita did not consent to go with him, for she said, "Not that I doubt your faith or your courage or your ability, but since Ravana stole me like a thief, it would be degrading ourselves to his low level if we fled like a thief, without notice or intimation. Moreover, my sorrowing heart will scarcely be fully comforted unless and until I have seen my false abductor fall on the field of battle, and those sinful eyes of his that glanced lasciviously upon me, picked out of their sockets by kites and vultures."

Hanumana was delighted to hear this heroic declaration from the lips of Sita ; and he prepared at once to depart, not caring to run risks for Sita by longer stay. So he took leave of her, asking what message he was to deliver to her lord, in answer to the one he had brought. Sita gave him leave, and said, "Tell my husband to hasten to my relief as swiftly as he can, for I can bear no more to live aloof from him. Tell him that, though I am all unworthy to be his consort, he should hurry to my side, not for my sake, but for the sake of his own honour. Tell him also that if I am destined to die in this dungeon, my last prayer to the gods will be that I may be my Rama's wife in the next birth again."

"But," interposed Hanumana, for the tell-tale dawn was already brightening up the eastern horizon, too quickly for such sentimental utterances, "I want something that will serve as an unmistakeable proof of the fact that I have discovered you."

"Well, then," said Sita, "Take this jewel and hand it to Rama : it will remind him of me and may relieve his sorrow to some extent." She took off a jewel from her tresses, and gave it to Hanumana, who hastily left her presence and passed out of the garden unnoticed by the sleeping guards, who never scented danger even in their dreams.

Hanumana's mission was now over ; but he thought, since he had come to Lanka and discovered Sita, he might just as well go a step further, and seek to persuade Ravana to give up Sita by peaceful means. But to approach the presence of the Rakshasa monarch was not such an easy job as stealing into the garden-prison of Sita. Hanumana was not much skilled in diplomacy, nor was he an adept in political negotiation ; so he decided upon a curious device to gain audience of the king of Lanka. He entered one of Ravana's pleasure-gardens, and ravaged its valuable plants

and herbs, right and left, repelling every gardener who attempted protest or violence. The matter was soon reported to the king, and some of Ravana's sons and others ran to arrest the mischief-maker. A skirmish followed, and one of the princes, named Aksha, was slain in it; and it was not until a regular force under the crown prince, Indrajit, was sent against Hanumana that he could be caught and hauled up before the king.

Ravana in a stern voice demanded who he was, and why he had come to Lanka and ravaged the royal garden. Hanumana was not the man to tell a lie, or tide over a present difficulty by a cunning prevarication. He made a truthful avowal of the whole affair, telling Ravana that he was the henchman of Sugriva, who had been restored to the throne of Kishkindha by the prowess of Rama and his brother, Lakshmana, and that he had come to Lanka in quest of Sita, whom he had discovered concealed in such and such a garden.

"But why didst thou cause a breach of the peace, subsequent to the accomplishment of thy task of espionage?" asked Ravana in a vociferous tone.

"Because," replied Hanumana, "I had a mind to gain audience of you, and I could think of no speedier way. I fought with the men you sent against me, because they came to fight, and I did not like to disappoint them. I am sorry there were some deaths among them, but I couldn't help it."

"But what motive couldst thou have in seeing me?" asked Ravana, in a tone of anger mingled with perplexity.

"I have a serious business to talk over with you," was the curt reply.

"And what serious business can a wild freebooter have with the emperor of Lanka?" asked Ravana with some sarcasm.

"Sit and listen," replied Hanumana; "my liege-lord and sovereign, Sugriva, sends you his greetings, and bids you take heed of the consequences of your sinful deed in stealing Sita. You are not only a powerful king, but also reputed to be as learned and wise a sage as ever sat upon a throne; and you know probably better than any, certainly better than many, that an act of wrongful sin is visited with divine retribution swiftly and surely. There is no juggling with sin, and of all sins one of the blackest is to seduce

a married woman who is devoted to her lord. And this foulest of sins thou hast committed, without colour or excuse, impelled thereto by brute lust. Brute lust may be superior in brute force, but there is something higher than physical force, something which brings about victory by unseen means, and that is righteousness. There is time yet for you to relent and to repent: give back Sita in peace, and pray to God on bended knees to forgive you for your sin, and all may yet be well. But if you persevere in your sin, and defy the Right, let me tell you that your proud city shall fall in ruins over your head, and crush your crowned pate to atoms."

Ravana was mightily incensed to hear this admonition, every word of which smote him with a directness he had never experienced before. In his wrath he ordered his men to take away Hanumana and put him to death. But Ravana's youngest brother, Bibhishana, remonstrated against this extreme penalty, pointing out that such a course would be adding wrong to wrong, the slaying of an envoy being forbidden by every law, human and divine, savage and civilised.

Ravana accepted Bibhishana's protest, and mitigated the sentence, commuting it to one of

branding. Hanumana was accordingly taken away and branded with fire-brands, some of which he managed to seize, and with them he set fire to a great many buildings, and caused immense damage and endless confusion, which gave him a capital chance to escape from Lanka, without further molestation.

CHAPTER XII.

Preparation for War.

Great were the rejoicings of Sugriva when Hanumana returned from his mission and reported all-round success in it. Information was at the same time sent to Rama and Lakshmana, who interviewed Hanumana, and questioned him as to the minutest details of his adventures in Lanka. Hanumana gave them as full an account as he could of his doings and sufferings, not omitting to mention the attempt he had made of a peaceful settlement of the matter in dispute. He then delivered to Rama the jewel which Sita had handed to him, and Rama burst into tears at the sight of the dear token, saying, "Too well I remember this tender token,—the bridal gift of her father, Janaka. How can I ever forget or mistake this sweet memorial which Sita wore on her brow, when glowing with divine beauty she first became my bride and consort. Ah! the sight of this sparkling jewel brings back those happy days vividly to my mind! And now, my faithful

friend, tell me where Sita is, tell me how she looked, and what she said." Hanumana once again recounted his adventures in every detail, and once again Rama heard the story with the eager interest of a boy attending to a fairy tale.

As soon as the rains were past, and the autumn season had set in, military preparations on a huge scale were set on foot by Sugriva. All vassal states were called upon to furnish contingents for the expedition proceeding to Lanka, and the response received by the call was beyond all expectation. In a few weeks a formidable force of valiant Vanars had assembled under the blazing banner of Sugriva. Rama and Lakshmana inspected the troops, and their hearts were filled with hope at the sight of the high degree of military efficiency which they displayed. Before the march began, Sugriva held a review of the vast army, and addressed the men thus :—
"Soldiers—Let it be known that you are going to meet a foe as formidable in physical force as subtle in cunning knavery, and that ye have not only to exert every muscle and nerve, but also to employ every aid of artifice to overcome and outwit him. No one knows better than myself that in prowess and valour you yield the palm

to no force, earthly or heavenly ; but along with your daring and determination you have to exercise a wise discretion, in order to avoid many a seductive snare that the traitorous foe will sedulously throw in your path. I know you will not lose your heart, even though many of you might lose your head ; that repulse and reverse will only make you doubly determined to win that victory which the justice and righteousness of your cause have ensured for you. It is a knavish, thievish, slavish foe that we have got to overcome ; but remember that no victory is worth having, unless it is gained with honour."

The soldiers listened to this stirring address with the greatest enthusiasm. They bent their heads in token of meek obedience, and they touched the hilt of their swords as a sign of their willingness to lay down their lives for the sake of their king.

Just after the close of the review, the trumpets sounded the march, and the vast army moved southwards, rank after rank, one line following another, like the billows of the sea. After a week's march the troops reached the southern point of the peninsula, and were face to face with the sea. And now a serious problem presented itself : how

was the ocean to be crossed? A whole army had to be transported across with bag and baggage, and the means of communication with the mainland maintained at the same time.

Meanwhile, there was bustle and commotion within the kingdom of Lanka, where the news of the marching expedition created some amount of panic and consternation. Ravana hastily summoned a council of war to consult his kinsmen, ministers and generals, as to what steps should be taken to oppose the invaders. Addressing the assembled chiefs, Ravana said, "Princes, Statesmen, and Leaders—It is not unknown to you that a secret spy has lately visited our shores,—I am alluding to that long-tailed traitor, Hanumana, who, crossing the ocean barrier, entered the very confines of the royal palace, stealing even into the secret prison where I have kept Sita in confinement. Not content with this, he set fire to many of our public buildings; and now he has encamped a vast army on the opposite coast, almost within bowshot of our castle. And I have called you together to confer with you as to the measures that we ought to take to repel this danger. The wisest kings are they who always act on the counsel of

their ministers. The next in order are those monarchs who, being gifted with extraordinary wisdom and sagacity, act on their own judgment, and undertake sole responsibility for both success and failure. Last in the scale of wisdom are those unfortunate sovereigns who act heedlessly, rashly, and unwisely, and thus court disaster with open arms. Corresponding to this threefold classification of kingdom is a threefold division of ministers. The wisest counsellors are those who, being deeply versed in sacred lore, can see furthest into the future, with eyes unblurred, unbiassed, unblinded by prejudice or passion. The next in order are those who pronounce their judgments after fully weighing the *pros* and *cons* of every question; and the lowest are undoubtedly those who in a season of crisis allow heat and passions to sway their minds,—and to plunge the king and his kingdom all into an abyss of ruin. I do not claim to be the wisest of monarchs, or to be the unwisest either; but I am anxious to listen to the voice of reason, the voice of cool deliberation, the voice of my princes and peoples, which to my mind is the voice of God. Utter your mind, therefore, as freely, as frankly, and as fully as you can; and

my meek duty shall only be to shape in deed and action what your tongue decrees in sound or sense. Speak with an undivided mind, and I shall obey your mandate with the loyalty worthy of a king."

There was a burst of acclamation as Ravana resumed his royal seat, though the cheers were not perfectly unanimous, there being one or two in the assembly who abstained from cheering. Then there was a pause as of silent deliberation, after the lapse of which Prahasta, the chief minister of Ravana, stood up and expressed his views in a brief and telling speech: "Why, O Ravana, does thy heart quail at the thought of a threatened invasion of thy country by a horde of Vanars, led by a couple of homeless hermits? Gods and angels have sustained retreat and repulse at thy hands: what hast thou to fear from feeble mortals? Hanumana entered Lanka stealthily, like a thief, simply because he had not the courage to approach openly. What now, if he does approach with a numerous following of brutes of his own species? I will drive them off like a herd of deer, and clear thy kingdom of these futile foes with a single sweep of my bare arm. Ravana has nothing

to fear, as long as his faithful forces are at hand to guard his person and defend his throne."

Prahasta was followed by Durmukha with a speech in similar accents: "Hanumana has defied our power; Hanumana has flung insult at us; Hanumana has burnt our towers and temples; I hereby take a vow that Hanumana shall not live to boast of his misdeeds; he shall die the death of a vile traitor at my hands. There is no need to muster any army, no need to fight bloody battles,—I alone am enough to make an end of the craven spy and set all trouble at rest."

The next to stand up was Vajra-danshtra, so named because he had teeth of steel; and, as he spoke, he held his battle-mace by his side, as a sign that he was most eager for war. He said: "Why should we spill unnecessary blood and waste our strength in a war against mortal foes? What need is there to muster and move armed forces to crush invaders like these? It is like breaking a butterfly on a wheel. A single blow of this mighty mace is enough to push them as far away as the other side of the world. Or, if this should be deemed inadvisable, let our Rakshasa armies assume the disguise of Bharata's forces and appear before Rama, who, thinking

them to be friends sent for his aid and assistance by his ruling brother, will welcome them eagerly, and then our soldiers can make short work of him and his armies in a moment."

Next rose Nikumbha, son of Kumbhakarna and nephew of Ravana, who spake with the quivering passion of a youthful warrior fresh in arms. He said, "Most keenly am I longing for the hour when thy royal command will bid me march against the infidel invaders and drink their heart's blood. O how I long for that happiness: how my sword dances in its scabbard at the thought!"

He was quickly followed by another young warrior, named Vajrahanu, of iron jaws, who also thought that there was no need of going into the formality of waging regular war against foemen whom the Rakshases would prefer to devour with the greatest avidity.

At this stage of the proceedings there was another pause, during which it appeared that the consensus of opinion was in favour of war. Ravana listened to these speeches with the greatest attention, sharing the cool judgment of the older warriors with the bounding enthusiasm of the younger. Suddenly stood up Bibhishana, the

youngest brother of Ravana, whose very manner of rising foreshadowed a voice of dissent and disagreement with the views that had been expressed with so much dash and vigour. There was an ominous cloud upon his brow, a look of despondency in his eye, and a note of warning in his voice, as he said, "Forgive me, my sovereign Lord and Brother, if I have the presumption to sound a note of dissent and produce discord in the midst of the prevailing harmony. Rama's invasion is not actuated by lust of conquest or restless ambition: his cause is as righteous as any that ever unsheathed a sword; and it is as vain for a lustful monarch to wage war against him as for a felon to establish his honesty as against the god of virtue. Rama is strong in force, because he is strong in faith, in truth, in right. That is not a common Vanara who crossed the ocean, and defying our guards and sentinels made a successful entrance into the royal prison. Nor is he a helpless hermit who is leading those countless legions across tracts of forest land, and thunders at our gates from the opposite shores of the sea. Judge impartially which of the two contending parties is in the right and which in the wrong,—he who committed

the act of theft or he who is pursuing the thief ? Was it really not an act of theft for thee, O Ravana, to have carried off Sita from the custody of her rightful lord, and to keep her in confinement in a stronghold of Lanka ? What outrageous offence had either Rama or Sita committed,—what grave provocation had either of them given thee ? None. Thy act was therefore an act of wanton wrong, a crime without a single palliating or extenuating circumstance—a dastardly deed, unjustifiable except by the code of fiendish immorality. Pardon my strong expressions,—but they are the only ones that can with any degree of expressiveness describe thy dark deed. Take my brotherly advice, if thou dost at all value thy safety and the integrity of thy kingdom:—Give Sita back to her husband before it is too late, before Rama's death-dealing darts have laid thee low, before his all-conquering arms have subdued thy kingdom and devastated thy fair empire. Accept my friendly counsel, even though there be none to second it,—restore Sita to her husband, and all may yet be well. Take heed of my warning, listen to my earnest entreaty, grant my humble prayer, lest thou mayest have cause for

repentance, when the hounds of war have been let loose beyond recall."

Bibhishana was followed by Kumbhakarna, another of the brothers of Ravana, who was noted as a profound sleeper, so that the story goes that he slept away six months at a stretch. He approved of Bibhishana's warning, but expressed his readiness to fight for his king and country until the end. "My Lord," said he, "what Bibhishana has said is perfectly right,—namely, that you should have paused and deliberated before determining to steal another man's wife ; and that since you sought no man's advice when committing this secret sin, you well deserve to suffer the consequences of that deed, aidless and alone. Advice, when sought too late, is worse than useless : it is only a form of coloured repentance ; and if this is so, be advised by your own conscience to repair the wrong you have done, by restoring the stolen property to its rightful owner. But if you be unwilling to make such reparation, it is still my duty to follow thee in right and wrong, to obey thy high behests as befits a loyal subject, and to shed my blood, if need be, in the defence of thy person and throne. It is not for me to discuss questions of right and wrong : my right

and wrong are those that my king declares to be right or wrong. I know of no duty but to act faithfully by my king and brother, be he right or be he wrong. If he calls upon me to fight, I fight ; if he tells me to sleep, I go to my usual slumber with the same readiness. I am not afraid of Rama,—neither am I afraid of the mightiest gods : let them come and cross swords with me. All I know is to wield my trusty steel on behalf of my king,—let wiser heads worry about right and wrong.”

The last to speak was young Indrajit, the crown prince of Lanka, and one of the bravest of the Rakshasa princes. He had won his name of Indrajit, because he had once quelled Indra, ruler of heaven, in an open encounter. The valiant prince had at first decided to sit silent ; but when he heard Bibhishana’s speech, he could sit still no more, and, as soon as Kumbhakarna had resumed his seat, he stood up and said, “Pay no heed, my royal sire, to Bibhishana’s cowardly counsel which is so utterly unworthy of a scion of the noble stock from which he has sprung and the bright traditions he has to uphold. How can puny mortals stand comparison with stalwart giants of our race ? Who are Rama and

Lakshmana that we should shudder at their name? Shall we quail before helpless hermits, or submit to the blustering of a mere wind. These arms of mine laid low the usurper of heaven himself—dealt a mortal blow on a reputed immortal; and shall I now moan and whine for fear of a pigmy prince? No; the conqueror of Indra, the tamer of Indra's mighty elephant, Airavata, shall not yield before a marauding mortal, or be cowed by a band of long-tailed monkeys!"

Ravana sat silent, listening attentively to these discourses of his rough and ranting chiefs, and then closed the proceedings of the council by his royal decision, which he announced in the following terms:—

"My verdict is for open war. Dost thou hear this, O Bibhishana? An undisguised enemy is better than a cloaked kinsman; a poisonous cobra is a sincerer friend than a faithless brother. Let the world beware,—O let the race of man take warning that the story of the wolf in sheep's clothing is a fable most aptly adumbrating the dark designs cherished by perfidious friends in the secrecy of their jealous hearts. And no brothers are more fitful in their friendship, more treacherous in their guile, more rancorous in their

hatred than brothers to a king. One might as well trust an adder's fang as the false professions of a royal brother. How such folk cannot help grieving whenever they view me shining in my royal splendour ; how they die of envy when they see me winning honour and renown ; how they cannot bear the merest sight of anything that conduces to my glory or gain ; on the other hand how they scan with eager eye every fault or foible that blots or blurs the white purity of my name ; how gleefully they chuckle over every failure that overtakes my path ; how fervently they wish and pray for my speedy fall ! Beware of kinsmen—there are no worse foes than our own kith and kin. Do ye know, O courtiers, how wild elephants are captured ? How would it be possible for man to catch by sheer force an animal of such prodigious size and strength, had it not been for the existence of traitors in the camp. And such a traitor is my own brother Bibhishan ! As long as human nature is what it is, so long will near relations be deceitful and treacherous. Just as rain-drops fall upon the lotus leaf, but yet stand apart, dripping down to the ground at the faintest touch of the wind, in the same way near relations

preserve a selfish aloofness even while they seem to mingle element with element. Like the thunder that rattles among winter clouds, false kinsmen are loud in their professions of friendship and love, but are lacking in those refreshing and fertilising qualities that test the real worth of empty protestations. Like the buzzing bee, false relations fly from friend to friend, sucking the honey out of each, then deserting him in the hour of need. All these remarks apply to thee, Bibhishan ; thou art as false as hell ; thy words are as lying as drunkards' oaths. Thy motive is too transparent to need any explanation : thou art actuated by envy pure and simple. Thy secret wish is to occupy thy elder's throne, and with that end thou pratest thus of peace. Go, take thy treason to the enemy ; do thy worst ; level thy weapon against thy brother's breast. I cannot find it in my own heart to shed a brother's blood ; I therefore spare thee thy cursed life, and charge thee to leave my court this instant."

Bibhishan's face flamed with wrath at these unjust and cruel imputations, and in a voice quaking with tumultuous feelings, he said, "Dost thou speak thus to me ? Well,—it is

not thou alone whose true nature I have thus found means of discovering ; but I shall refrain from retaliation even in language. Thou hast spoken in terms which I could not have endured if they had come from other lips. I contradict every word of thy unjust censures. All that Bibhishan had aimed at was to guard thy person and to ensure the safety of thy realm ; but if these be matters of no moment to thee, thou art welcome to hurl thyself on the rock of destruction and witness the end of thyself and thy empire. And it shall be my reluctant and painful duty to watch the extinction of as fair a kingdom as monarch ever ruled. Well have the sages said that “whom the gods wish to ruin, first drive them mad.” Thou hast trusted the advice of courtly counsellors, whose sole duty is to flatter thy vanity, and thou hast turned a deaf ear to the voice of brotherly love,—nay, gone the extent of calling it treason. The fates are all-powerful. Go, then, and perish on the foeman’s sword, since thou art bent on courting death. But yet, O my King, O my brother, let me plead once more, not for my own life, but for thine,—for the safety of a monarch’s precious life, for the continuance of

a kingdom's existence, for the preservation of the lives and property of thy unoffending people, for the wail of homeless widows and the cries of helpless orphans. Think of these, O merciful monarch, and recant thy rash decision. It is never too late to retrace a false step. Unsheath that proud sword now drawn so unrighteously against a righteous foe. It is thou that art guilty : thy foeman is only the avenger of thy guilt. Repent and retreat, I charge thee once more."

Ravana turned his face away at these departing words of Bibhishan, who instantly left Lanka and crossing over to the mainland joined the party of Sugriva.

CHAPTER XIII.

A Last Effort for Peace.

War was now inevitable ; war was in fact imminent. The last attempt for peace had been made and had been frustrated by Ravana's headstrong obstinacy. Bibhishan was branded as a traitor and turned out from the court, and, as has been stated, he speedily quitted Lanka and crossing over to the mainland made overtures of friendship at the camp of Sugriva. Bibhishan was not alone ; he was accompanied by four other deserters, and all five of them offered their services to Rama. But Rama refused to have any dealings with traitors. He even declined to grant an interview to base deserters. But the shrewd Hanumana perceived that Bibhishana was not a common traitor, that his professions of friendship for Rama were prompted by a deadly hatred of his own brother, and that it would be contrary to ordinary humanity to deny to him the ordinary protection afforded to every suppliant. Care, of course, was needed, so

that Bibhishan might not get an opportunity of betraying any confidence that might be reposed in him. And so at the suggestion of Hanumana, Bibhishan and his followers were admitted—not indeed to the confidence,—to the protection of Rama.

And now a serious difficulty presented itself to Rama. The ocean had to be crossed before Lanka could even be touched by the hand of war. A host of Vanars were at once commanded to construct a causeway across the strait that still separates the soil of India from the island of Ceylon. They rolled down huge boulders from the slopes of hills and piled them on top of one another and laid them across the breadth of the sea so as to extemporise a sort of bridge which would afford safe conduct to the invading army. And thus the allied princes crossed over to Ceylon. But still, even though he had set foot on hostile soil, even though he had actually defied the lion in his den, even though there was every indication of coming victory, Rama's noble heart, framed as it was of the highest heroic metal, shuddered at the thought of shedding the blood of numbers of the enemy's troops, and all for the sake of rescuing

Sita. Well, if rescuing the captive Sita was the sole motive of those military preparations, might not that object be just as successfully attained by peaceful negotiation ? It is true that such attempts had been made, and had failed, and that it was because the methods of peace had been exhausted that the methods of war had to be resorted to. Nevertheless it was decided to make one more effort to avert war. Accordingly Rama entrusted Angad with a friendly message to Ravana, asking him in all courtesy to restore Sita to her husband and by so doing spare the lives of the thousands of soldiers that were sure to be killed on either side, in case the matter should proceed to extremities. Ravana received the envoy with the scantest courtesy, saying, "Thy master seems to think like a silly child. What I mean to say will soon dawn upon his mind, or rather I should say, be driven home into his heart with cold steel."

"Why not," said Angad, "reserve that cold steel of yours, of which you seem to be so proud, for some one who reciprocates your enmity more truly than Ramchandra ? Ramchandra's mission is one of peace. All he seeks is to get back what is his own by all the rights of heaven and

earth ; and it is only when this will be denied to him that he will be obliged, regretfully enough, to draw the sword, and meet cold steel with cold steel."

"Don't you," asked Ravana craftily, "feel shame to appear as advocate for a murderous prince who snatched away the life of your own father Bali ? How can you turn such a traitor to the memory of your sainted sire and profess allegiance to his slayer ? That slaying of Bali was an act of downright treachery committed for interests as selfish as those that ever prompted the most unscrupulous of tyrants. If you have even a tiny spark of honour and self-respect, abandon this execrable position of serving one who slew your father. If you stand in need of a pittance, I am ready to put you in command of one of my own armies, and you have an opportunity at once of showing your mettle and avenging your noble father's death."

"Gramercy," replied Angad, with a scornful smile playing upon his lips, "I scarcely deserve the dignity of leading a band of rabble Rakshasas against a prince who is the embodiment of virtue and righteousness. Keep that dignity for one of your hungry brothers, who will doubtless

relish it. As for my father's death, I do not wish to open up a healing sore, nor afford you further information as to the manner of it than that it was both just and justified ; but no more of that. I glory in being now a follower of Ramachandra, and I think I am the best judge of what is honourable or dishonourable for me."

After a brief pause Ravana replied, " You regard Ramachandra, then, as a model warrior ? He is your type of chivalry ! A type indeed ! "

" I do not think," retorted Angad, " my present mission is one for exchange of discourtesies. I have come on an errand of peace primarily ; but if peace be repugnant to your taste, I am empowered to treat you to another kind of fare. You see me as I am, and I am, let me tell you, the weakest individual in the whole of that huge host that has assembled on the sea coast. Here do I plant my foot : and I now defy the stoutest of your champions to come and lift this foot above the ground."

Ravana wondered what this strange challenge might mean ; but he thought it was best to take Angad at his word. So he said, " And what if one of my men does displace that foot of yours ? Will you name the wager ? "

Angad replied that in that case he would be prepared to suffer any punishment that might be meted out to him, adding that in case of failure Ravana must similarly pledge himself to acknowledge defeat outright, and be prepared to suffer what humiliation he might be put to by the victor.

The contest began, Rakshasa after Rakshasa came up, each trying to lift Angad's foot off the ground, and each retreating completely repulsed. One or two of the champions could, they thought, shake the leg by so much as a gentle tremor, but lifting it even a fraction of an inch was impossible. Ravana witnessed the discomfiture of his men with undisguised dismay, and feeling a devil rising in his heart, he himself rose from his seat, and offered to try his own strength. At this Angad drew back his foot, saying, "Nay,—I cannot allow Your majesty to touch my foot; you forget in the heat of the moment that the person of kings is sacred and that it is sin for any one if his foot happens to touch any part of a king's body."

This seasonable piece of diplomacy dropped the question of the wager, and at the same time gave Ravana some ominous misgivings as to

the stuff his soldiers were made of That not one of them should have been able to lift a man's planted foot off the ground by so much as an inch,—well, that was, to say the least of it, extremely disappointing. Was his army composed merely of “palm-leaf soldiers?” Was not there one among his men with strength enough to lift a man's foot? These thoughts, instead of inducing Ravana to give up his idea of war, merely served to deepen his determination to indulge his devilish nature to the fullest extent. Angad had no alternative but to return disappointed in his pacific mission.

Meanwhile a knot of secret spies had been detected prowling round the camp of Rama and Sugriva ; they had been sent by Ravana to bring whatever information they could regarding the strength of the invading forces and the probable intentions of the invading foe. Bibhishan quickly detected their movements and penetrated their disguise, and would have wished to see them shot or hanged or lynched ; but Rama took a kinder view of their offence, and had them brought to his presence. The trembling captives appeared in chains in Rama's tent ; but Rama gave them courage and hope, and bade them fear

nothing, saying, "Nay, fear not; fear me not, although I be your enemy. In watching our movements and in computing our force, ye have but done your duty to your king, and shall I punish you for obeying the call of duty? Go back in peace to your king, and report all that you have seen of us. If you wish to see more, to obtain fuller details, to extend your espionage, you are welcome to it by all means. No harm shall be done to you: it is neither our principle nor our practice to attack unarmed foes. Return to your homes safe and secure, and tell your king that since he has refused to listen to the gentle voice of peace, he shall have to listen to the hoarse voice of war, unwilling though I am that this should be the case."

"May victory attend your steps!" gasped out the astonished spies, and quitting the presence of Rama they hastened to the palace of Ravana, and poured into his ears a stream of unstinted eulogy of the enemy's inconceivable magnanimity and irrepressible anxiety to settle the issue by peaceful negotiation. They also entreated Ravana not to risk his fortunes in a contest with one who was every inch a paragon of virtue and righteousness. Ravana turned a

deaf ear to their entreaties, and attributed all their talk either to bribe or to fear. So still his obdurate heart was bent on war.

And there was one other thing, fouler than war, on which his heart was bent still more strongly ; and that was his lust for Sita. He had tried every art of persuasion and entreaty to win her consent to be his bride ; but she had haughtily scorned his overtures. He had then resorted to fulminating threats and blustering boasts, and even these had no effect on her, captive though she was in his hands, and helpless and friendless and desolate. He now thought of making use of stratagems. Creeping into the *Asoka* garden in which she was kept confined, Ravana approached her presence like a timid slave, and laid his crowned head at Sita's feet, imploring her mercy, and professing love to her in words of spasmodic emotion. But Sita spurned his head away, and turned her face in another direction to avoid even the sight of one whose very looks she detested worse than her own miserable confinement. There was a ray of hope now streaming in upon her heart : she had heard that her Rama was at the very gates of Lanka, and she had for the first time since her captivity

begun to entertain the hope of release. She scorned Ravana therefore with double detestation, and defied him in words of insulting irony. "Go and hang thyself as speedily as thou canst," said she, "lest thou should suffer a worse hell, when thou fallest into captivity in the hands of my lord, than the dungeon thou hast shut me in ; for I know—I already know—that my own dear lord is near at hand to effect my rescue."

"Nay," said Ravana, "banish that hope for ever from your mind. It is true indeed that your lord crossed the sea and landed in Lanka, but the very next moment I marched against him and killed him in honorable combat ;—he is no more, even he, your Rama, on whom you are doting like a blind idiot, and for whose sake you have so long rejected my own proffers of love. I have cut off his head with one sweep of this bright sword, and if that trunkless head or that headless trunk be any solace to you, I am willing to produce either before you, as proofs of my own valour. Come now, there is no obstacle left in the path of the fruition of our mutual love. Nay, start not ; I cannot but believe that you reciprocate my love. Come,

and be mine own chosen love, the empress both of my heart and of my empire."

Sita sat aghast for a few moments, as though pondering whether or not to believe the words of Ravana ; and then she burst forth into a flood of blinding tears. Ravana in his wonted heartless manner thought her tears to be only a pretence and a mockery ; and so he went on : " Dry those unseemly tears : they scarcely become a beautiful face like yours. Perchance you doubt my words ; perchance you wish to have proofs of my assertion." And he sent one of his Rakshasa attendants to fetch Rama's supposed head and bow. The Rakshasa obeyed, and in a moment returned with a severed head in one hand and a mighty bow in the other. Sita gazed upon the blood-smeared face and the darkened eyes ; yes, they were indeed her Rama's. She gazed upon the wondrous bow : there could be no doubt about its being the same mighty weapon that her warrior lord bore in his hand as he wandered from forest to forest in her company. A crowd of past memories thronged into her mind, and dimmed her eyes still further. She thought of Queen Kekayi,—how she would chuckle over her complete triumph ; she thought

of the desolate queen Kausalya,—how she was now doubly lonely and widowed; she thought of her own father, the saintly Janaka,—how he would take the news of Rama's death like a sword-stroke; she thought of the many prophecies of future happiness, the many blessings of bright fortune that had been uttered on her marriage-day, and how all these had been falsified in one cruel moment. Her own heroic devotion to her husband had turned into a curse; she had been rewarded in the strangest manner for her unflinching faith. The heavens were indeed unjust. There was no fair dealing to be expected at the hands of the all-ruling Providence. Good had now no power to overcome evil; on the contrary evil was henceforth the paramount power on earth.

Sita kept mourning in this strain in the silence of her own heart, her eyes streaming with tears all the time. Then suddenly she broke forth into another loud wailing. Addressing the lifeless head lying before her, she said, "O Rama, is this thy end? Hast thou indeed left me defenceless in the hands of thine enemy? Didst thou not swear on our wedding-day that thou wouldst not desert me, but wouldst continue

to guard me, to watch me, and to nestle me by thy side? Why then hast thou forsaken me in this frightful plight? But what plight can be more frightful or more pitiable than widowhood? A widow before I ever became a matron! O my dear husband! Let me call thee by the dear name of husband once more, before even this lifeless image is taken away from my presence."

She then sat still and silent for some moments, while Ravana fixed a keen glance of inquiry upon her face to ascertain how far her sorrow was sincere, and how far feigned for the sake of wise decorum. She then addressed Ravana: "O wicked and ruthless King,—thou hast never been more wicked and ruthless in all thy past life than when thou didst basely murder my dear lord and husband. But I will cease to regard thee as a cruel king if thou dost mercifully cut off my head too and lay it by the side of yonder figure. I beseech thee, if thou canst at all be moved by the tears and entreaties of a torn heart, I beseech thee, slay me with that same bright sword of thine, and I will venerate thee as a saviour and look upon thy sword as a sacred weapon. For I wish to be united with my husband in death, as we had ever been in life. Nothing can keep

me away from his embraces,—not these prison walls, nor these horrid sentinels, nor yet thy indomitable will.”

So Sita mourned and mourned, until her head drooped low, her eyes swam, and her senses took leave of her. She fell down on the ground, a bundle of clothes apparently without a body. Ravana ordered her female attendants to bring her back to life, and himself quietly slipped out of the garden, fully persuaded that his stratagem had signally failed,—nay, produced just the opposite of the intended effect. For instead of inducing Sita to discard her husband and attach herself to Ravana, it had made her all the more determined to preserve her faith unshaken, and to repel the overtures of Ravana all the more scornfully. For she was now a desperate soul, not only not afraid of death, but actually wooing death.

Happily however Sita's grief was of short duration, not, of course, because, as Ravana first thought, it was insincere, but because it was caused by a false report and a cruel deception. As soon as Ravana left the *Asoka* garden, a tender-hearted Rakshasa woman, one of her own guard, who was named Trijata, and who had from the first

felt a secret pity for her on account of her tender age, came and told her that it was all a hoax and a lie, that Rama was safe and sound, and marching proudly at the head of his gallant army to invest Lanka and to free her from captivity. So violent had been her grief at the sight of the severed head that she first disbelieved the words of Trijata, who, she thought, was contradicting Ravana's report merely to assuage her grief ; or perhaps, she suspected, she might be after some game of her own. But the Rakshasa woman gave her convincing proofs of the truth of her own assertion and the absolute falsity of Ravana's report. At any rate Sita felt that there was something suspicious in the quiet way in which Ravana had slunk away from the garden, and that there might be some truth in Trijata's words.

While Ravana was busy giving final orders to his commanders as to how they were to meet the attack of the invaders, the oldest ladies of his house, notably his mother, were trying to make one more attempt to persuade Ravana to accept peace. The poor old lady had witnessed many an evil omen. Crows and kites, owls and vultures had alighted and perched upon the towers of the

royal palace. Flaming meteors had shot across the sky, and a darkening eclipse was just then "with fear of change perplexing monarchs." She therefore appealed to Ravana not to risk the safety of his person and the fortunes of his empire in a war against princes who were as unlike him in their nature as their forces were unknown and unnumbered. She admonished her son on his evil ways of life, his greed, his lust, his cruelty; and she could not help feeling the present invasion of Lanka as a divine visitation intended to punish his shameless iniquities. But Ravana heeded her not. He contemptuously drove his mother away from his presence, saying that it was not for old crones to meddle in affairs of high moment or to dictate peace and war to mature statesmen or mighty sovereigns.

The last effort at peace thus ended in a fiasco; the last reed of hope smashed in two; the last glimmer of light faded to darkness. And as the shades of night rolled away, the dawn of day revealed to the eyes of both parties arrays of "marshalled battalions bright in burnished steel."

CHAPTER XIV.

War.

The hostilities that commenced now were honest war,—war conducted in strict conformity with the military code of honour of those days. Even the hollow formalities of a regular declaration of war were not allowed to be dispensed with, so anxious was Rama to abide by the letter of the law. Then followed the exchange of mutual assurances of honourable fighting,—pledges given by each belligerent that the operations would be carried on with scrupulous regard for the laws both of honour and of humanity. When these preliminaries were over, the invading forces rushed lustily upon their enemies,—as eager to meet the foe as a pack of chained hounds suddenly loosened upon their prey. In a moment the city of Lanka, Ravana's proud metropolis, was completely surrounded. Ravana scaled the highest summit of the palace roofs to obtain a bird's-eye view of the investing forces, and he could see nothing but masses of soldiery as far as his eyes

could go. His wrathful heart could not brook the humiliation of sustaining a long siege with patience. So he ordered the city-gates to be flung wide, and before the enemy could force an entrance through them, dense bodies of Rakshasa soldiers, armed from head to foot, sallied out madly and attacked the besiegers at every point. In one moment the plains around the city became an enormous battle-field, and every division and section of both the attacking and the attacked armies were put to action simultaneously. A gigantic affair it was, coming as it did with such a suddenness, and assuming such vast dimensions like the instantaneous blaze of a gun-powder magazine. The slaughter was on a scale proportionate to the immensity of the numbers engaged on both sides. Whole ranks of the opposing armies were laid low in a single encounter, like long lines of standing corn levelled with the ground by a single gust of stormy wind. Vanars and Rakshasas lay huddled together in heaps, and it seemed as though in the promiscuous slaughter friend and foe had become indistinguishable, more especially since the fighting was at such close quarters. For the allied forces of Rama and Sugriva had put a girdle round the

ramparts of Lanka, and were blocking all egress and ingress, when suddenly through the opening gateways of the city streamed forth bands of armed Rakshasas, who pierced and penetrated the besieging forces at every conceivable point, so that friends and foes were mingled together in woeful confusion. All day long the noise of battle hurtled in the air ; screams of agony and cries of onset ascended up to the skies ; clouds of dust hovered above the ground and spread a thick screen on every side ; so that the issue of the struggle was involved within a blind veil. But on the whole it was the Vanars who seemed to pay the heaviest toll of the carnage. Their dense masses were thinned down ; their adhesive force weakened ; their dash and courage turned to wavering. Rama and Lakshmana saw this, and hastened to the front to rally their men, and it was only then that the resistless tide of Rakshasa onsets could be stemmed. With their bows held firmly in their hands, Rama and Lakshmana sent forth a shower of hissing shafts into the advancing ranks of the enemy, and mowed them down as they swept before him in a succession of long columns. The Rakshasas had at first a distinct superiority

over their foes in the possession of elephants, war chariots, and battle steeds ; the Vanars trusted chiefly to their own long arms. But under the personal lead of Rama and Lakshmana, not only did the Vanars hold their own against the enemy, but dealt some smashing blows on him, and in a few hours one of the Rakshasa commanders, named Vajra-danshtra, took to his heels, his "iron teeth" being apparently an inadequate shield against the Vanar shafts. The next moment, however, Indrajit, eldest son of Ravana, appeared on the scene, and opposed his might against that of the Vanars. He was the possessor of a number of celestial weapons, which in an earlier war he had seized from the vanquished Indra, god of the skies, and these gave him an immense advantage over his foes. For they not only rendered his own person proof against hostile shot, but also enabled him to achieve successes of greater magnitude than could be accomplished by arms of earthly make. Angad hastened forward to meet the attacks of Indrajit whom however he was unable to overpower beyond slaying his battle coursers and compelling him to forego the luxury of fighting from the top of an armoured chariot. By so doing, Angad

had hoped to reduce his foe to a level of military equality by forcing him to fight on foot. But Indrajit had another resource to meet the situation. All of a sudden he flew up on the air and hid himself among the clouds,—a circumstance which acute critics have interpreted to mean that he knew the use of modern aeroplanes. Anyhow he had disappeared from the ground, and was raining down arrows on the hosts below from his aerial post in the clouds, directing his aims chiefly at Rama and Lakshmana. At last he took out his famous serpent shaft or Nagadart, and hurled it upon his foemen, drawing their very life-blood from their heart. Rama and Lakshmana were powerless against such a foe, stationed as he was among the clouds, invisible and inaccessible himself, yet watching all and reaching all those stationed below. Such a vantage-point was impregnable, and Rama and Lakshmana vainly struggled for hours to keep up a contest which was so terribly unequal. The unseen foe dealt down darts on the Vanar army from above, with telling effect, while the shots aimed at himself flew wide of the mark and were literally lost in the clouds. All of a sudden a dreadful serpent-noose was encircled round the very

persons of Rama and Lakshmana, both of whom fell fainting on the battle-field in an anguish of pain.

It was the hour of midnight when the first day's operations closed in such tragic gloom. For even at the setting of the sun the battle did not stop ; it was the first flush of the fighting, the first dash of onset on the part of either party. It was not a case of attack by the one and defence by the other : there was a simultaneous attack by both, an attack for which neither party was sufficiently prepared. The Vanars had come to fight in the leisurely fashion of a slow siege ; the Rakshasas had prepared only for the patient duties of standing on their defence ; and each party was therefore more or less taken unawares when suddenly called upon to assume the fiercest offensive. Hence the confusion was as confounded as the slaughter indiscriminate ; hence also the tragic ending of the first day's drama.

On seeing Rama and Lakshmana faint, Indrajit thought that he had made short work of his principal enemies, and right glad he was in his heart. He came down from his cloudy concealment in all the haste he could, and betook himself to his father, impatient to tell him

of the great victory he had won and of the speedy way in which he had terminated what threatened to be a prolonged contest. Ravana received his son with a demonstration of affection that one would suppose to be rare in a Rakshasa. He clasped him to his bosom, and fondled him like a babe, speaking honeyed words that sweetened the very soul of the puffed-up prince. "My son," said he, "thou hast to-day achieved a task which the mightiest monarch might well be proud of. Thou hast conquered with one brief blow an enemy who, I feared, needed to be hacked by little inches. Thou hast not only vindicated the proud name of Rakshasa, but added to our laurels wreaths of such undying glory that our royal house ought never allow them to fade or wither. May the Fates grant thee an undying life that thou mayest thyself wear and cherish thy laurels for ages untold." In this strain did Ravana praise his gallant son Indrajit ; and then with the same impatience, he ordered his chariot to be got ready, and Sita driven in it to the gory field so that she might witness with her own eyes that Rama was now dead indeed. The royal mandate was no sooner uttered than obeyed, and the trembling Sita was

ruthlessly caught and seated on the chariot, and whirled away to an unknown destination. She thought she was being carried to the royal palace for some unspeakable act of violence ; she had just sense enough to think that, and no more ; for instantly after that, all sense quitted her, and she lay in the chariot, only a heap of fluttering garments. But the cries of the dying soldiers that still strewed the bleeding field brought her back to consciousness, and her eyes opened to a scene of the wildest horror,—scattered limbs torn from the body ; dismembered corpses that could scarcely be distinguished from the mangled carcases of horses and mules beside which they lay ; streams of purple blood, here flowing, there stagnant. And in the midst of all this she noticed her own Rama, lying apparently lifeless, with his body stretched out in rigid length and encircled by many a rill of blood. Indeed there could now be no mistake, she thought ; her Rama had doubtless been killed in battle by the ravenous Ravana. For some minutes tears and words both failed her, and then, when she realised or seemed to realise the exact situation, a passionate wail pealed forth from her lips, and she mourned : “ O Rama, my lord and king and

husband and companion ! Didst thou quit thy native city to die in the foeman's land ? Didst thou bridge the foaming ocean to court death, not to rescue me ? Didst thou dare the dastardly Rakshasa to fall a victim to his treachery ? Ah me ! Why was I ever born, to witness a spectacle like this ? Was it for this that the saintly Janaka took me out of the field-furrow, and was it for a life of death-like widowhood that he cherished my childhood and my youth so lovingly ? What living warrior is there who could conquer thee in open conflict ? Surely some craven craft, some base villainy must be at the bottom of this ghastly mystery. Lakshmana, thou art happier than thy lonely sister : thou art lying clasped in an embrace which has now been denied to me for ever. Thou art more faithful too as a brother than I could be as a wife ; for thou hast not parted from thy brother even at the moment when soul and body part. But I mourn n thee so much O Rama, nor for thee, O Lakshmana, for both of these have died a warrior's death ; neither of thee could wish for any form of death happier than to lie on the bloody field. Nor do I weep for my own lonely lot so much,—I was all my life a child of woe. Born of the Earth, my

insensible mother, I was nursed in the lap of affliction from infancy ; I grieve indeed for that poor mother and widowed queen, who is eating her heart in solitude in the palace towers of distant Ayodhya, and dreaming of the day when her Rama will return home in happiness at the conclusion of his fourteen years of exile. How many a tender tie has snapped in one awful moment ! Sita has lost her lord and husband ; Kausalya is bereft of her son who was her only hope ; Ayodhya has lost her sovereign Lord and King ! For which of these shall I grieve most ?”

Sita lamented long and loud in this wild strain, and then paused from sheer exhaustion and faintness. Then Trijata, the Rakshasa woman who was one of the guard placed in watch over her person, and who had come to feel a secret sympathy for her, approached her warily from behind, and placing her hand on her back, said in a consolatory tone, “ Weep not thus, my gentle Sita ; thou hast no cause to bewail thy widowhood, for thou hast not become a widow as thou fearest. Thy husband is only severely wounded, and is lying senseless from the effects of bleeding and pain. I tell thee, he shall soon revive,—and resume the fight against his enemies.

Rama and Lakshmana shall both revive. Indra-jit in his pride thinks he has killed his antagonists, and Ravana in his stupidity is but too ready to believe his word, without waiting to take the evidence of his own eyes. I have seen more deaths than that arrogant prince, and I can assert on the strength of my own experience that it is only a death-like swoon that has come upon thy husband and his brother. Mark how the Vanars are marshalling themselves for fresh encounters ; hear how they are ringing their war-cries in many a lusty peal : that is not the way an army behaves when their leaders fall. Mark how the Vanars, watching beside the prostrate heroes, are looking neither sad nor anxious, but rather joyous and hopeful, as though they were glad that the enemy had been so far circumvented. Trust my words : they speak but the barest truth, as thou shalt thyself find quickly enough. Let us leave this spot now with full faith in the healing effects of time."

Sita was greatly reassured by these encouraging words, and there was now no doubt left in her mind that the whole affair was either another piece of cruel deception intended to deepen her misery, or the result of a real mistake on the part

of Indrajit. She had also learned to put more faith in Trijata's honesty of motive, and yielding to her wishes, she withdrew from the battle-field back into her prison in the Asoka garden. Rama and Lakshmana were, as we know, in a fainting-fit, and not dead, and the winged god Garuda's skill soon restored both brothers to consciousness and to health and vigour. And the weary war was waged again with redoubled fury, and the fortress of Lanka pressed closer and closer on every side with redoubled force. The Rakshasa leaders were amazed at the sight of Rama and Lakshmana coming back to life from a state of apparent death : that was a trick which they, with all their cunning arts of deception, were incapable of performing. And they resumed the fight ostensibly with great dash and courage, but really with an inward consciousness of despair at the thought of fighting a foe who seemed to know the black art of returning from the grave. Dhumraksha, one of their commanders, did not seem to entertain any such thought, and advancing like a tornado he swept the ranks of the besieging army, uprooting standing fields of soldiery and laying them low on the ground. Hanumana swiftly stepped forward to resist the shock, and opposed

his mountain might against the stormy onset of Dhumraksha, who dashed himself again and again upon his foe with as little effect as a gust of wind beating upon a cliff. Then finding the foe at a disadvantage, Hanumana lifted an enormous boulder and flung it with wrath sheer upon the head of Dhumraksha, and slew him in one moment. Iron-toothed Vajra-danshtra, who had come back to the fight, was the next to lead an attack against the besiegers, and it was Angad's turn to meet him and make short work of him. Akampan commanded a third attack, and he skilfully directed it against the exhausted forces of Hanumana, whom he thus hoped to overpower. But Hanumana was a wary leader : although he had slain one Rakshasa chief as easily as he would have slaughtered a goat, he did not feel any triumph over it, and stood on his guard as cautiously as though he had still to meet his foe. It was not very difficult for Hanumana therefore to vanquish this second assailant also, and to lay him lifeless on the field. Prahasta then rushed forward impetuously to cut the besieging line, hoping thus to plant his forces behind the enemy, so that the foe might be attacked simultaneously both in front and in the rear. But his swift

movement was quickly intercepted by the Vanars, and the mighty-armed Rakshasa chief fell on the field of battle, as falls the forest tree under the woodman's axe. A succession of defeats like this was enough to shake the iron firmness of Ravana. He had lost leader after leader, and each loss had the moral effect of disheartening his own forces and encouraging those of the enemy. He therefore thought it his duty to take the command of his army himself, and personally lead an attack against the foe. "I have hitherto refrained from daubing my hands in this blood-shedding business," said Ravana, as he accoutred himself in his weapons, "out of sheer disdain for the foe ; but I can stand this no longer. The blood of kinsmen slaughtered before my eyes moves my own blood too much to allow me to stand aloof any longer. Revenge speeds me on my path !"

So saying, the Rakshasa monarch mounted on his battle-car, and urged it on with fiery speed right into the thickest ranks of the Vanar army. He was supported on his right and left by a royal body-guard of invincible might, and as the armoured chariot rattled on, the beating of drums, the blowing of conch shells, and the

shouting of war cries heightened the dreadful roar. The very first blow dealt by Ravana on the enemy was a rude reminder to the Vanars of the awful fact that in Lanka's monarch they had a warrior who was likely to prove a tough morsel even for their sharp teeth. For the Vanars were quickly scattered to right and left at every point pierced by the royal chariot. Such was the vigour of the onset that the most solid formations of the Vanar army melted away into thin liquid. Hundreds of Sugriva's forces were driven as far back as the sea. It seemed as if they were a mere bushel of chaff blown away by a sudden whiff of wind. To retrieve the situation, Sugriva himself hastened forward to oppose Ravana, but Ravana, flushed with victory as he was, simply brushed aside the obstacle, and passed on. Next Sukena tried to stem the tide of onset, and him too the powerful warrior drove back with an easy hand. The heaviest missiles of war were aimed at his person and hurled against his chariot, but nothing seemed to produce the least effect upon the dauntless King, who sped on his resistless path, sweeping obstacles, warding blows, and crushing all opposition. The Vanars were demoralised, and felt as

helpless against such a foe as a herd of deer-
attacked by a tiger.

At this extremity, Hanumana suddenly appeared upon the scene, and the sight of such an able commander, who had never yet known repulse or retreat, filled the Vanars with fresh hope and courage, and they once more made a stout stand to face the attack of Ravana. But even Hanumana, a warrior of unblemished record, was powerless against the Rakshasa king, who seemed to be fighting under the protection of some magic art that rendered him proof against individual prowess and collective might alike. Hanumana did achieve some little success, but it was soon rendered ineffective by an accursed arrow-shot that pierced his limbs and laid him wounded on the ground. Consternation now seized the whole Vanar force. The Rakshasas had not only taken full retaliation for the slaughter of their chiefs, not only taken life for life, but had indeed levied a heavier toll on their foes ; for the disablement of two such veterans as Sugriva and Hanumana was a more serious loss to the Vanars than the death of scores of such Rakshasa chiefs as the Vanars themselves had slain. And Ravana's resistless

car rolled on in resistless might, dealing death and destruction among the hostile forces, until Lakshmana himself had to march forward to stop its further progress. Without fear or faltering, the young prince challenged the grizzled king in words of withering scorn : " Welcome, proud king of Lanka's isle ! I invite your majesty to a personal combat : why do you wage unequal war upon humble Vanars ? " Ravana felt the taunt, and replied in words of savage irony, " Welcome, silly little prince of Ayodhya ! It is Ravana's dearest wish to slay thee with his own hands."

And the two adversaries closed in a combat which for hours swayed backwards and forwards like the tides of the sea. Each shaft that Ravana aimed at Lakshmana was shot away from its destined course by an arrow aimed by Lakshmana against itself, and not against his adversary. This he did in a masterly fashion. To ward off an arrow from one's body, by interposing the shield, is a task of considerable difficulty, requiring a precision of the eye and agility of the limbs that even the most practised warrior cannot always command ; but to shoot an arrow against a flying arrow so successfully as to turn its

course, is a military feat of the highest skill, bordering almost on the miraculous. But even such miracles did not save Lakshmana long ; for, finding himself powerless, Ravana drew his *Sakti* shaft, endowed with supernatural powers, and aimed it at Lakshmana. Lakshmana's merely human skill was of no avail against this enchanted weapon : it pierced his body and laid him senseless on the battlefield, bleeding profusely, while Ravana, deeming himself well rewarded for his pains, retreated into his palace.

A council of Vanar leaders at once assembled round the body of Lakshmana to decide and do whatever might be needful to save the prince's life. With the friendly aid of Bibhishana the services of a renowned surgeon were procured as speedily as circumstances permitted. The surgeon examined Lakshmana's wound and pronounced it serious, though not fatal. He said that there was a particular herb growing on the top of such and such a hill, which alone could do any good to the wounded prince, provided it could be procured in time. Hanumana was accordingly despatched post-haste to that hill to gather this healing herb and bring it before break of day, for the learned leech had declared

that if the day should dawn before the medicine could be administered, the Creator Himself would not have power to save the patient's life. Hanumana knew nothing of this medicinal plant, nor did he pause to receive accurate instructions for identifying it, except the vague one that it emitted a bright effulgence in the dark. There was no time to be lost in vain questionings ; so Hanumana started off for the hill with all the speed he could command, for the night was wearing away, and the dreaded dawn hastening at an alarming rate. On reaching the hill-top, a fresh difficulty presented itself : many a herb and many a flower was there, glistening like stars in the darkness. Which one was the herb in question ? There was again no time to lose in idle speculation : a layman could hardly draw nice distinctions between different species of plants so similar in outward look as to puzzle even a botanist. What was he to do ? There was certainly no time to go back and gather further particulars about this strange herb, for the sun was not far off from the brink of the eastern horizon. Was Lakshmana then to lose his life, merely because Hanumana had failed in his duty ? No ; Hanumana would rather die than be found amiss or remiss

in the discharge of his duty. With this thought goading him, Hanumana made one mighty effort of his powerful arms, and with heaving breast and distended nostrils, proceeded to lift up the entire hill on which the life-saving plant grew; and lo ! the hill was actually uprooted from its base, and the next moment it rested on the ample shoulders of Hanumana, who marched with his precious load as lightly as a gay girl tripping on to the village well to draw water. He strode on from ridge to ridge, climbing down craggy shelves of rock, and at last reached the level land, and, breathing more easily, ran with a quicker pace to where a despairing knot of anxious friends were bending over the pale face of unconscious Lakshmana. The first faint streaks of grey were overspreading the eastern sky when Hanumana deposited his precious burden at the door of Lakshmana's tent. There was a sudden loosening of the intense tension of suspense which had held Lakshmana's friends during all those hours that Hanumana had been away in quest of the herb on the hill. And now the herb was speedily administered, according to the directions given by the surgeon. The effect was more miraculous than even Hanumana's digging

up a whole hill from its foundations ; for, before the full disc of the sun had appeared above the horizon, Lakshmana was completely restored to life and strength, so completely that it seemed as if he had never been wounded at all.

The news of Lakshmana's revival revived the courage of his friends as much as it mortified the spirits of his enemies. Even Ravana seemed to have caught the common contagion, for the next day he was nowhere to be seen on the field of battle, but preferred to ensconce himself behind the safe shelter of his ramparts. He gave the command of his army to his brother, Kumbhakarna, who had lately been roused from one of his prolonged fits of slumber, perhaps, by the clash of arms just outside his bedroom walls; and when he came, Ravana said, " O Kumbhakarna, thou alone canst redeem the honour of the Rakshasas at this critical juncture. The enemy is pressing us on every side, and threatening to root out our very existence. He has hemmed us in within a wall of bristling spears and shafts, from which it is hard indeed to escape. Thou alone, of all my chiefs, canst save the life of our kingdom and the honour of our arms. Make haste, therefore, to meet the cruel invader, to

break the links of his military chain, and chase the shattered fragments across the seas!"

In the whole of the Rakshasa army there was not a warrior more courageous or more loyal than Kumbhakarna. His only defect as a man-at-arms was that he was a heavy sleeper, but once he could be roused from his interminable slumbers, or induced to shake off his inveterate lethargy, his fierceness struck terror and dismay into the boldest hearts. And now, with his thunder-voice shaking earth and mountain, he sallied out of the city walls, and hurled his towering stature upon the besiegers, crushing a mass of them under his ponderous weight, as though they were but a swarm of ants crushed underfoot. His gigantic stature alone was sufficient to make the puny Vanars tremble with fear; his thunderous voice added to the terror of his person; and Vanar after Vanar, as he sighted his huge figure or heard his loud roar, turned tail and took to flight. Angad viewed with alarm the panic that had seized his army, and rallying his men, he addressed them as follows:—

“Whither are ye going, ye valiant Vanars? The victory has not yet been secured,—the enemy has not yet been vanquished, his pride has not

yet been humbled. Until these are accomplished, it is not yet time to pause or to take rest, or to go back home to our wives and children. What though Kumbhakarna wields the limbs of a giant? There is no giant but can be conquered by a determined will. Unite once more in a combined attack and dash down the enemy on the ground."

At these stirring words, the flying Vanars rallied once more, and tearing down rocks and trees, they hurled these upon the enemy in quick succession from every quarter. But the rocks shivered in splinters against the steel structure of the giant, and the trees crashed upon his head with as little effect as a shower of flowers. Again and again did the Vanars attempt to overpower him by dexterous combinations, and again and again did the formidable foe repel their attacks as easily as he would have driven back a flock of sheep. The Vanars once more showed signs of wavering, and to rally them Hanumana put himself at the head of a fresh attack, and opposed his personal valour against the giant might of Kumbhakarna. But even Hanumana proved no match for the brobdignagian warrior; and after a short futile contest he was thrown down, stricken by one of the rude weapons of the foe. Five other

Vanar chiefs then tried their skill, one after another, to overcome the invincible Rakshasa, and each of the five met the same fate as Hanumana. It was a most awful crisis in the fortunes of the war; it seemed as if brute force counted for everything even in a righteous struggle, as if bulk and sinews were more ensuring means of victory than truth and justice. There was blind rage among the Vanar commanders, and blank despair among the Vanar troops. Commander after commander had advanced against the foe, only to sustain repulse or fall. At this stage of the operations, Angad came forward to lead the Vanar forces. Inflamed with wrath, he tore a mighty rock and hurled it with consummate force against the giant, who staggered and shook, but kept his feet as firmly as before. And the next moment the giant replied to the attack by darting at Angad himself, and lifting him up from the ground he flung him bodily to an extreme corner of the battlefield. It was now the turn of Sugriva to make a trial of his skill. But he too was at last overpowered and driven back with head long speed. There was now nothing to bar the enemy's advance upon the Vanar centre, which was commanded by Lakshmana. It was the most

critical point of a critical situation, for if Lakshmana should suffer the same fate as the other leaders, the Vanar cause must be taken as lost. Lakshmana understood the situation, and knew that it was upon him that the very existence of the Vanar army rested. He had, therefore, spared no pains to prepare himself and his forces to meet the onslaught of a foe who had become doubly ferocious in consequence of his late successes. Kumbhakarna surveyed the scene as though he had already gained complete victory. He marched towards Lakshmana with the air of a conqueror proceeding to enter a captured town ; and when he saw Lakshmana, he spoke to him in words of scathing bitterness : " Hail mighty prince and warrior, thou hast vindicated thy claim to these titles by a display of pussillanimity truly unrivalled, and by the demonstration of a feebleness indeed undying. But I am going to search a mightier foe still ; for it is but waste of time to bandy swords with a younger brother when his elder is within measureable distance of my steps. I would fight Rama himself, and leave the lesser fry to be disposed of by lesser hands. So just let me know where thy brother is, that I may bring this bloody business to a quick close."

Lakshmana replied, with all the seriousness he could command : "I thank you, proud prince, for your ill-timed sarcasm ; but if you indeed mean to disregard my challenge, and to wish for a speedy termination of your career, look yonder where Rama awaits you in the guise of the God of death."

Kumbhakarna, drunk with victory, meant indeed to scorn the challenge of Lakshmana, for he calculated that if he could vanquish Rama, the sparing of Lakshmana would not signify much harm. So he threw himself in opposition at once against Rama, little knowing that even the supernatural was unavailing against the divine. The contest was of short duration. The giant's enormous bulk, which had hitherto proved a tower of strength, made him now an easier target for Rama's quick-flying shafts. The larger surface of his body afforded larger room for the lodgment of an ampler quiver of arrows. In the very twinkling of an eye, Kumbhakarna's lofty stature and gigantic dimensions were lying in the dust, an armoury of sticking arrows. His huge head was lying sundered from the body in a pool of blood. Life had long become extinct, when Ravana

came to the field to reinforce his brother's troops.

The fall of Kumbhakarna marked an important stage in the prosecution of the war ; for it meant the timely riddance of a dreaded foe who had wrought considerable havoc in the Vanar army, and, what was worse, had created panic and consternation among the invading forces. His death now rejoiced the hearts of his enemies, and encouraged them with fresh hope and courage. The result was that, when the Rakshasas renewed their attacks under other chiefs—Narantak, Devantak, Trisiras—they obtained an easy victory over them, slaying those chiefs and decimating their ranks. The death of these leaders grieved the heart of Ravana far more than the fall of Kumbhakarna ; for, while he mourned the loss of the latter as a valiant commander and a faithful follower, his successors in command were Ravana's own sons. For, though Ravana had an army of sons, the loss of his own flesh and blood cut the father's heart in pieces, and for the first time since the commencement of the war, tears of sorrow were shed by the heartless monarch in a passion of genuine grief. His eldest son, Indrajit, hastened to his father's

side to administer consolation. "Mourn not," said he, "Thou hast no cause for grief as long as I am alive. As long as a single son is spared to thee, thou shalt remain invincible. I thought I had made an end of the pigmy princes in the very first encounter, but I did not then know that those crafty fellows could also successfully feign death. Well,—I will go again and finish the work I began ; and I shall take care not to allow the enemy a second chance of treacherous dissimulation. Listen to my vow, my royal sire,—that before the setting of yonder shining sun, Rama and Lakshmana shall both be cleared from thy path. Bear witness to my words, ye gods in heaven, as well as ye devils in hell !"

With these words, uttered with all the puffing that his lungs could sustain, Indrajit betook himself to the battlefield, and once more ascended into the clouds, preferring the security of his aerial station to the risks of fighting on foot or from a chariot. Thick was the shower of arrows that he rained down on the helpless Vanars, whom he slaughtered in numbers proportionate to the intensity of the shower. The Vanars quickly understood that they had to

fight the same invisible foe who had, on an earlier day, disabled Rama himself, and with this thought their joints became as supple as water. Once more were they victims of panic ; once more they turned their faces and fled in the direction of the sea ; and once more it was a problem to their leaders how to check this demoralisation. Rama himself was greatly perplexed, and in his despair, spoke thus to Lakshmana : "Once more has that craven Rakshasa hid his face among the clouds, and from that vantage-point he is slaughtering our men with savage brutality. To my mind, this is not war, but butchery. Can you conceive of a warrior who shuns to show his face ? And yet Indrajit professes to be a warrior, when the only principle of war he knows is to murder our men in cold blood ! You see, then, what like these barbarians are. Such ways of waging war are a downright insult on the honorable profession of arms which the greatest kings, and even gods, are proud to adopt. It seems to me that it is but reckless dissipation of our energies to attempt fighting a foe that knows only how to ply the butcher's trade. Let us, therefore, endure his shafts as long as he has any shafts to

send down on us, or as long as we have breath left to suffer in silence."

As a matter of fact, Indrajit had many a shaft left in his quiver, and Rama and Lakshmana many a breath for endurance, when the Rakshasa prince had to come down from his cloudy towers in consequence of the failing of daylight. It was impossible to carry on the aerial warfare longer than the duration of daylight. Rama and Lakshmana had good reason to feel thankful to the shades of night, not only because they had brought the butchery to a close, but also because the suspension of hostilities had afforded them time to think out some device with which they could fight Indrajit at less odds. Suddenly the idea dawned upon their minds that the best way to frustrate Indrajit was to force an entrance into the city of Lanka, so that, if the Rakshasa prince repeated his aerial performances, some of his shafts were sure to hit his own men, whether they were soldiers or only peaceful citizens. So, long before the daydawn, Rama and Lakshmana forced an entrance into the city of Lanka, and their soldiers followed them in such a swift stream that the whole effective force was well

within the city gates before the Rakshasa troops could be roused from sleep to reinforce the outnumbered sentinels who were guarding the gates. Indrajit soon heard of the fact that the enemy had made their way into the city in the darkness of the night. He was loud in denunciation of what he called the treachery of the enemy, and he determined to pay them in their own coin. So he made a beautiful waxen image of the likeness of Sita, and placing it in his car rode about the battlefield making a parade of his gallantry. The Vanars looked upon the image, and, in their simplicity, thought it was Sita herself. And when Indrajit was persuaded that his trick had so far succeeded, he struck the image with his sword before the full gaze of the astonished Vanars, many of whom shrieked with pain at the sight of a solitary defenceless female being murdered in savage style by a prince of the blood royal. Word to this effect was forthwith brought to Rama, who was made to believe that Sita had been taken out of her custody and put to a public death by Indrajit. Rama, who in his tender love for Sita forgot sometimes to consult the voice of reason, burst into a stream of tears

at the news, believing it quite in keeping with the character of the barbarians to cut the throat of an imprisoned dame and say that they had done so as an act of fair reprisal in war. But Bibhishana disbelieved the news absolutely, and tried to console Rama with arguments that carried conviction with them:—"Trust me, Rama, trust thy faithful comrade and ally ; I tell thee, what the Vanars have reported to thee must be another of those base tricks for which my honest kinsmen have a peculiar aptitude. It cannot be that Indrajit has slain the princess whom his father dotes on. It is for the sake of winning Sita that Ravana is waging this unholy war, staking his crown, risking his life, suffering toil and hunger ; and can't it be that his eldest son should slay her ? Dare he do so ? It does not need much ingenuity for any one to understand this simple matter. It must have been some other woman resembling Sita, or more probably only an image of Sita, that Indrajit has slain or made a pretence of slaying ; or the whole thing might have been a complete hallucination, which the Rakshasas know well how to create ; for it is extremely improbable that the son should slay the very woman for whom the

father is ready to give up his life. Grieve not for Sita : I warrant, she is safe and well ; gird up thy loins to sweep Indrajit away from thy path ; and I'll tell thee how thou canst accomplish this end ; for I know the secret art which gives to that cloud-fighter the immunity on which he prides so much. There is a noted necromancer, named Nikumbhila, who, by the aid of magic rites, confers on Indrajit the secret power of fighting among the clouds. Let Lakshmana challenge him to a single combat, before he has finished his secret rites,—I'll guide him to the spot myself, and see to the success of this enterprise."

Rama lost no time in acting on Bibhishana's counsel and sending Lakshmana with him to where Indrajit was already performing unholy sacrifices under the direction of his unholy preceptor. The Rakshasa prince was startled to hear the martial tread of warriors on the sacrificial site, and turning round, he noticed the advancing figure of Bibhishana, the sight of whom boiled his blood. With his face turned crimson with rage and his voice quaking, he addressed Bibhishana thus :—"Art thou that traitor who was once my father's brother, and

art thou now stealing here to steal my life? False to the noble name of Rakshasa, false to thy king, false to thy kinsmen, thou hast deserted us in the hour of direst need. I pity thy present lot—thou bondman to our country's foes—thou, whose sword is uplifted against thy own motherland—I pity thee too deeply to think of revenge: thou shalt meet thy deserts at the hands of the same foe thou hast gone to serve!”

Bibhishan coolly made answer: “Rude boy, thou hast spoken poison; but I’ll not taint my arms by shedding thy vile blood, thou vile brood of a vile serpent. But let me tell thee, proud youth, that Truth and Virtue occupy a higher place in my heart than the low, self-seeking affection or policy which binds together kinsmen or comrades in an unrighteous cause. Know that unrighteousness has a dissolvent power which severs even ties of blood, whereas Truth and Justice have an adhesive force which creates ties firmer than those of blood. An impious kinsman is worse than a righteous foe. Listen further. The earth has grown tired with bearing the burden of thy father’s misdeeds and sins, and both heaven and earth have declared his life forfeit and his crown confiscated.

He shall perish in this very war, and thou and the rest of his hellish offspring shall also go the same way."

Indrajit did not listen to the whole of this reply ; for his attention was meanwhile drawn towards Lakshmana, whom he at once recognised as the foe he had twice wounded in the field. Without caring, therefore, to return the taunt of Bibhishana, Indrajit proceeded to fling taunts at Lakshmana : "Hast thou forgotten the beating thou receivedst from me on the field of battle ? Hast thou escaped with thy life from those wounds I inflicted on thee and on thy brother ? Why hast thou come again to repeat that awkward experience ? Is it because thou art not satisfied with mere wounds, but wouldst have death itself ? If so, thou shalt readily meet thy wishes."

Lakshmana retorted in words of the same stinging irony : "Coward as thou art, thou hast fought from the safe shelter of the clouds, shrinking to appear on the battlefield for fear of losing thy wretched life ! I have now come to fight an open combat with thee on the ground, and not up in the air like kites and crows. Lose no time in vain prattle : words before blows,—that is the coward's maxim."

Indrajit had no course open to him but to consent. The two warriors immediately closed together in a combat. At first, either from the lingering faintness of his late wounds, or from the too impetuous eagerness with which he fell to the fighting, Lakshmana seemed to be yielding ground to his opponent, who soon cut off his armour, which fell clanking to the ground. But the loss of his armour, while it certainly multiplied the risks of the battle by exposing his body, made Lakshmana's movements freer and less encumbered. He was now able to spring forward and backward with more nimbleness; he could use his bow and arrows with greater agility; and he could leap aside from the path of a hostile dart more quickly. These advantages were more solid than the doubtful protection afforded by a battered coat of mail; and these advantages began soon to produce a visible effect on the course of the combat. Indrajit yielded a step with almost every arrow shot at him, until a masterly aim from Lakshmana's bow cleft his enemy's bow in two, and speeding onwards pierced his bosom, lodging finally in his heart. Indrajit fell bleeding on the ground, and his proud spirit unwillingly quitted the body.

A messenger galloped forthwith to the royal palace to inform Ravana of the death of his eldest son. The unhappy courier could scarcely speak for tears. "The Sun of Lanka's glory," quoth he, "has set, leaving the land enshrouded in darkness: our beloved prince, Indrajit, has fallen in a cursed combat with the enemy." Ravana turned pale at the news; words and sense both took leave of him; and for some minutes he stared blankly at the face of the messenger, as if trying to read in his visage the true import of the tidings he had brought. Then he burst forth into a shriek that made the very towers of his palace vibrate with the echoes. At last, when speech returned, he began a sing-song lamentation in the following strain:—

"Bravest of my brave warriors,—dearest of my dear children, hast thou fallen? The gods themselves had no power to hurt one hair of thy head—what fiend was it that caused thy fall? Thy flaming shafts carried death and dismay wherever they alighted; mortal and immortal alike dreaded thy doomful darts; what loathsome mongrel was it that turned thy arms against thy own breast?—for I cannot conceive that any other dart could have touched

thy invulnerable person. The Dark Destroyer, Death himself, quailed before thy frowns; the clouds meekly served as thy war-chariot; the god of wind readily obeyed thy will;—O how could such a one ever fall? Why did I myself not fall in place of thee? Why did the foolish foe not seek my life? But perhaps I should not mourn thee in this disconsolate manner, for thou hast gone into the regions of the blessed, the Paradise of warriors, which will henceforth beam brightlier with the transcendent lustre of thy young heroism. Thy name which has hitherto signified the conqueror of a single god, will henceforth stand synonymous with the ruler of the three worlds, for thou wilt have no peer in heaven as thou hadst no equal on earth. And this is a fit subject of pride, not an occasion for sorrow. Alas! sorrow is distressingly sympathetic. O how those piercing cries coming from the Queens' apartments rend my own heart against my convictions! Alas for the hapless mother,—alas for the helpless widow! How couldst thou, O Indrajit, abandon thy poor mother or forsake thy devoted spouse? Thy father may find food for consolation in reflecting over thy heroic career, but alas! what potent

charm can ever chase away the spirit of grief from those two bereaved hearts? I used to dream that when full of years I should lay down the load of life, Indrajit would watch by my bedside, Indrajit would close my dying eyes, Indrajit would mount my throne and wear my crown, and thus perpetuate both my life and my rule ; but the malignant Fates have falsified my dream and reversed the order of nature, and the aged father mourns his youthful son in mockery of creation's established law."

Ravana kept mourning in this wise until the thought of vengeance suddenly smote him and roused him from his stupor. There was indeed no time to indulge in sorrow, not even for the death of a son. The enemy was still in their midst, and the death of Indrajit, besides inflicting a crushing blow on the Rakshasas, had given the Vanars a real reason for triumph. This thought, that the enemy was in a position to triumph, was more galling to the pride of Ravana than even the pain of bereavement ; and his mind therefore flew swiftly to the thought of revenge, instead of brooding over schemes of saving the situation. Gnashing his teeth, he exclaimed, "Blood for blood ! Sita shall perish by my sword, and her

blood alone can allay the torment of pain suffered by my heart by the death of Indrajit. Indrajit made only a show of slaying her : I will turn the show into a reality."

So saying, Ravana ran apace towards the Asoka garden where Sita was confined, and entering her chamber with a drawn sword in his hand, he uplifted his arm right above Sita's head, when suddenly his hand was caught by his courtiers, who forcibly withheld him from laying violent hands on a woman. "Nay," said they, "your majesty cannot so far forget yourself as to aim a blow at a woman, and a prisoner ! Do not defile that imperial sword with the blood of a female, when the fair field of war is open before you to use it more worthily. O king, you are not only a noble monarch, but also a sapient scholar, versed as deeply in the laws of chivalry as in the code of religion, and no one knows better than you that the blood of a woman casts a stain upon the name of a warrior which nothing can efface. Leave the wretched woman to weep and wail her lot, while your majesty may mount your battle car and lead your faithful followers on the path of conquest and glory."

Ravana had no recourse but to yield to the wishes of his courtiers. Slowly and sullenly he withdrew from the apartment of Sita ; but though his hand forebore to shed her blood, his heart still longed for vengeance. The death of Indrajit still rankled in his bosom, converting all thoughts and feelings to one dominant desire for vengeance. The subsequent operations of the war seemed henceforth to be directed to the sole object of avenging the death of Indrajit. The entire strength of his army was henceforth bent on wreaking revenge for the death of Indrajit. The surviving captains and generals of the Rakshasa force were henceforth to consider it their duty to wage ceaseless war to glut their ire for the death of Indrajit. The blood of Indrajit was crying loudly for revenge, and that cry was ringing day and night in the ears of Ravana, maddening him with fury. And in this state, he leaped upon his chariot and ordered it to be driven furiously to the field of battle. The sight of the royal chariot, emblazoned with the brightest devices worked in gold and gems, soon brought a crowd of Rakshasas to the spot. Soldiers and commanders both rushed to the side of their monarch, whom they surrounded

in an ever-thickening circle. Before commencing the battle, Ravana found an admirable opportunity of addressing his army. He delivered a most stirring speech, every word of which shot straight from his heart, still heaving with the upheaval caused by the loss of his eldest and favourite son. He began, "Soldiers, captains, and comrades—", but his voice was choked as he was reminded of the dear departed faces whom he missed from that assembly ; but shortly afterwards he made a fresh attempt, and said :—

"Let each warrior among the Rakshasa ranks deem it his individual duty to crush the foe. Remember, to-day it is not conquest that we covet, it is not glory that we seek,—it is vengeance that we thirst for, and vengeance is in every case a sacred duty. The fall of our slaughtered heroes merits swift retribution, and if ye tarry and linger, ye fail in the discharge of a most religious obligation. The spirits of your fallen leaders—Khara, Dushan, Kumbhakarna, Indrajit—are crying loudly to avenge their death. Let your vengeance be both quick and full. Strew the reddened field with countless corpses of Vanars ; sweep the ringing plain with lusty peals of our war-cry ; and make one

determined, combined attack upon the tattered remnants of Rama's army, and annihilate it. Nothing short of utter annihilation will be adequate, for as long as a single Vanar breathes the breath of life, no Rakshasa should feel that he has done his duty. Fight unto the last, until in place of the Vanar legions, you see packs of hungry wolves and screaming vultures blackening all the battle plain."

It was a truly demoniac speech, fully worthy of demons' ears. The Rakshasas were thrilled with excitement to hear it, and raising their battle-cry they rushed headlong against the Vanars in wave upon wave of angry attack. But the Vanars had now gained valuable experience of the Rakshasa mode of warfare, which consisted in hurling masses of men against impregnable points, and spending the blood of their soldiers as recklessly as river water. Hence as each attack came on, the Vanars lightly stepped aside from its path, and the attacks merely crumbled away into a heap of slaughtered soldiers of their own party. In their heedless courage the Rakshasa leaders fought with the blindness of desperation. The earth shook to their tread; the skies echoed with their roar; the field

streamed with their blood. Horsemen and footmen mingled together in confusion ; tusked charged against chariots, and chariots crashed against tusked. The infuriated monsters ran amok among their own men and trampled thousands beneath their heavy feet. The riderless charger dashed into the thickest squares of the Rakshasa formations, and bored ghastly holes in them. Loudly beat the kettle-drum, shrilly clanged the martial trumpet, fiercely pealed the cheery conch ; but these were no longer the prelude to mighty encounters,—they only rang the death-knell of the dwindling Rakshasa army.

Suddenly the skies darkened, and birds of night screamed out, as if in ominous apprehension of a dread evil. The earth shook and reeled, as if boding its own destruction. The ocean swelled in foam and dashed angrily on the shore, as if threatening to inundate the land. The elements seemed to be at strife with one another, and Nature herself appeared to be making war on man. But the Rakshasa monarch was blind to these awful presages, and believed in nothing but the duty of revenge. He saw the survivors of his army fall one by one ; he surveyed the battlefield littered with the corpses of his gallant

soldiers ; he gazed at the frowning heavens overhead ; but still he battled on, feeling unable to desist until he had wreaked full revenge. His ranks had thinned down on every side ; the steeds of his chariot had been slain and replaced by fresh steeds more than once ; the enemy was gaining ground by triumphant leaps and bounds ; but still the spectre of revenge beckoned him on. In his frenzied passage through the field, Ravana's eyes fell upon his brother Bibhishana fighting by the side of his dearest foe, Lakshmana. The sight of that deserter deepened Ravana's frenzy, and he madly rushed at him with uplifted spear. But Lakshmana dexterously aimed a shaft at the spear and blew away its shivered fragments in another direction. Ravana then made an attack upon Lakshmana, but the latter deftly turned aside, and gave room to Ravana to dash against one of his own men. And the blinded monarch, without tarrying for a blush, passed on ; and in the meanwhile fresh coursers were harnessed to his car, and he thundered through the battle-field, still thirsting for revenge.

And now the goal was reached—the goal of destruction that Ravana himself had prepared by his accumulated misdeeds. For speeding

onwards he sighted his arch-enemy Rama, who on his own part had been seeking him with the same ardour. The two adversaries instantly closed in combat, and never was combat keener contested. The exchange of blows was long and dreadful; arrows flew thick and fast from the opposing bows, and the head of either warrior was soon encircled by a moving flight of rotatory shafts. It seemed as if the contest was only a mock display of archery, and not a serious encounter for life and death. The tide of battle ebbed and flowed, and neither combatant appeared to be winning or losing an inch of ground, though both had well-nigh exhausted their capacious quivers. It was this single encounter that held the whole field, for everywhere else there was now a lull in the tempest. It was a lull caused by the growing faintness of the Rakshasas,—a faintness plainly perceptible in their sleepy manner of fighting, though hardly confessed.

The contest between Rama and Ravana was the most signal event of the war, as it was also the last of the series of attacks and counter-attacks that marked the tireless tide of the war. Each warrior was worthy of his opponent, and both combatants were unquestionably the flower

of their soldiery, and the leader of their ranks both in name and in deed. It was an even balance of natural valour and acquired skill. It was a king matched against a king,—a barbarian monarch opposed to a ruler who represented the highest point that Aryan civilisation had hitherto attained. It was really a struggle between brute force and the strength of right and reason. The eternal conflict between the principles of evil and good was typified by this single encounter between Rama and Ravana. Both kings had well-nigh exhausted their resources in men and arms, and the remnant of the Rakshasa force that survived was only fit to act as spectators in conjunction with the remainder of the Vanar army.

At last the long contest was ended. Rama took the consecrated weapon, presented to him by saint Agastya in the woods of Dandak, and sent it whizzing against his opponent's breast. The sacred shaft could not miss its mark : Ravana's bosom was pierced through in a moment, and the next moment his huge figure fell with a crash that seemed to shake the battle-plain from end to end. A cry of pain and horror rose from the Rakshasa ranks simultaneously with the shout

of pleasure and triumph that was sent up by the Vanars. It was now indeed the end of the weary war, the close of the long contest which had been fought at such heavy cost on both sides. Rama now unstrung his bow, and advanced up to where Ravana lay weltering in a pool of blood. He would have been happy to spare the life of his enemy, and to accept from him a confession of defeat and a restitution of the stolen Sita ; but life was fast ebbing away when he came up to Ravana. The sight of the fallen foe filled the hero's heart with genuine sorrow, and he could not restrain his tears, which fell fast and thick over the slaughtered body, which was still instinct with life. Unable to bear the sad sight, Rama withdrew hastily to his camp, and sent Lakshmana to join the Rakshasa band keeping watch over their dying king, and to assist them in performing the obsequies after the end had come. He also asked Lakshmana to beseech the dying hero to impart to him some of the best fruits of his ripe wisdom and masterly statecraft. "For," said Rama to Lakshmana, "Ravana has been not only a consummate warrior, not only a learned sage, not only an able administrator, but a man of varied experience who has tasted the sweet as

well as the bitter fruits of life to an extent that few can equal and none surpass."

Lakshmana went, and standing at the head of the prostrate figure, said, "May I trouble your majesty with a few words?"

Ravana opened his eyes and gazed at the face of Lakshmana with a wink of assent; and Lakshmana therefore proceeded: "All differences are now at rest, and I have come to make peace with you on behalf of my king, Rama. Peace be to you and to your soul. And now will you impart unto a younger friend some of the fruits of that manifold experience and that unrivalled wisdom which have enabled you so long to rule over the Rakshasa race with a success and glory that have no parallel in the annals of sovereignty."

Ravana closed his eyes instantly at those words, and it seemed to Lakshmana as if the dying king was too faint to speak, or as if the departing soul were too intent on heavenly thoughts to care for things earthly. So Lakshmana came back to Rama, and reported that he had received no response from Ravana to his request. "I stood," said Lakshmana, "at his head in an attitude of due humility, and spoke in a style of courtesy befitting a sovereign; but

still the closed eyes opened not, the sealed lips uttered no word."

"You made a mistake," said Rama, "go again, and stand *at his feet*, for you forget that a warrior whose life is hanging between earth and heaven, deserves a veneration like unto that we show to a god. Make haste, for otherwise it may be too late."

Lakshmana hurried his way again to where Ravana still lay dying on the gory plain, and standing at his feet, repeated his request, clasping his hands together in an attitude of the deepest humility. Ravana opened his eyes and smiled, and in a tone of the utmost solemnity said, "Learn thou this from me, young man, that vice is vice however it wears the garb of virtue : go thou not near it, nor let it ever come near thee, for it hath power to overthrow the mightiest king. Never despise a foe, however weak and contemptible he may look. Never trust a man whose blood is not pure. Never defer till to-morrow what thou canst do to-day, especially if it be some deed of good. Never turn a deaf ear to the counsels of reason."

With these words sight and speech both failed the sinking hero, and a few moments later

the end came. There was another burst of yet louder lamentation among the watching Rakshasas ; and indeed there was no sound but of sorrow heard anywhere within the limits of Lanka. Friend and foe wept together at the news ; Rakshasa and Vanar joined in lamentation, and one of the greatest mourners was Rama himself. He mourned the loss of a gallant foe—a warrior regrets nothing more keenly than the loss of warlike prowess wherever it might be lodged ; he mourned the disruption of a powerful kingdom ruled by a powerful king ; he mourned the practical extermination of the race of Rakshasas, who had offered such a striking contrast to the Aryan race, to which he himself belonged.

The news of Ravana's death spread through Lanka with the swiftness of a wildfire, and when it entered the royal palace, which had already rung so oft with cries of woe, there was a howl of lamentation, an agonised scream of despair that 'shivered to the tingling stars.' The widowed queen Mandodari wept in anguish over her slaughtered husband, saying, "O hast thou fallen, thou whom the world deemed invincible ? Thou couldst subdue the bright Immortals—hast thou been slain by an earthly mortal ?

O thou whose very frown was equivalent to death,—hast thou been laid low by a weakling man? No,—it could not have been a man, a mere mortal, that could vanquish the invulnerable ; it was the God of Death himself in mortal shape that had come to wage war with thee ; or it was perhaps Indra or Vishnu, ruler of heaven and controller of all earthly destinies, that wore the disguise of an Aryan prince in order to seize thy life and thy crown, and to turn me, reigning empress of a flourishing empire, to a helpless widow dependant upon the sweet goodwill of a conqueror for very bread ! The Vanars, whom we despised as long-tailed monkeys, were alas ! no monkeys, but gods of the sky who played that part to bring about our destruction. Even at that earliest epoch of this woeful war, when Khara and Dushan were slain far away in the wild woods I know not where, my heart was filled with suspicion ; I felt that an earthly creature could scarcely have power to slay those Rakshasa warriors ; and ominous misgivings tortured my fancy until I learned that that same individual, who had slain those two leaders, had crossed the angry waves and was actually thundering at the very gates of Lanka. No, it cannot be an earthly

mortal that hath power to span the boundless ocean, or to land troops on the invulnerable isle of Lanka. And the moment I heard this, I prayed to thee, O Ravana, with all the fervency that my heart was capable of, to restore Sita unto her rightful lord ; for I know that the holy writ sayeth that whole nations perish for the sufferings of a faithful woman. And 'tis also writ that the proudest monarchs suffer humiliation and death, if they are guilty of lewd lust. Alas ! my words fell upon unheeding ears, and I myself was cast off from thy embraces because I had the hardihood to point out thy vices to thee. Alas ! that painful recollection tortures my bosom worse than the agonies of death. The days shall daily darken around my path ; the months shall wear away and wither one by one ; the years shall roll on their eternal wheels ; but never shall Mandodari witness joy or peace again."

So mourned the widowed queen of Lanka's isle, while preparations were made for the funeral of the slain king under the personal supervision of Rama, who figured as the chief mourner in all the mournful proceedings. A pyre of the costliest sandal wood was erected,

and on it they placed the body of Ravana arrayed in the stateliest robes of state. There was no surviving issue of the blood royal to set fire to the pyre, and that filial duty, therefore, devolved upon Bibhishana, the sole survivor of the reigning dynasty of Lanka, who, though he had disowned his blood and disclaimed his kinship, was at this sad last hour, more helpful, more friendly, more dutiful than any of that boastful band of flattering courtiers and tall talkers who had branded him as a traitor simply because he had the courage to tell the truth, when all the rest paltered with it out of fear or flattery. The funeral pyre crackled and blazed, and Rama and Bibhishana stood beside it, witnessing the distressing scene with as much real anguish as the weeping queens and courtiers of the departed monarch. All was over in a few minutes; Ravana was now a heap of ashes, and the kingdom of Lanka, a legitimate conquest of Rama.

CHAPTER XV.

The Sequel.

The war was ended ; the barbarians who had harassed the lands and the lives of the Aryan settlers were lying crushed ; their king who had proved such a monster of iniquity was turned to ashes ; and the saintly Sita, who had been so sinfully stolen by him, was rescued from her cruel captivity. Not a moment was lost in freeing her from her bonds. As soon as the cremation ceremony of Ravana was over, Hanu-
mana was despatched to the Asoka garden to escort Sita to Rama's camp. Sita came, and the reunion of husband and wife after the pains and privations that each had suffered so long, was an occasion for joy such as falls outside the scope of modern human experience, and hence is incapable of being described in modern forms of speech or writing. It was like a full blaze of light dispelling the most cimmerian darkness in one instant, without any of the intermediate stages which mark the conversion of gloom to

glow. But there was just one little hitch to their perfect reunion,—a mere scruple, not originating from Rama, but thrust upon him by his soldiers. Sita had lived in the home of a foreigner ; a married lady had for a time dwelt under an alien roof ; and this single fact, apart from any base insinuations, was enough to throw a cloud of suspicion around her person. Of course these suspicions were first entertained by Rama's soldiers, and soldiers are, as everyone knows, accustomed to habits of thought peculiar to themselves. They declared that since Sita had been forcibly carried away by Ravana and had been confined by him in his castle, it was necessary that she should perform a ceremony of purification before she could be taken back by Rama ; and Rama accepted their declaration with readiness.

Sita was apprized of this suspicion, and Rama himself performed the delicate task in the most tactful manner he could. But Sita still felt deeply hurt that the unsullied purity of her faith should be called in question even for the sake of form and ceremony. She felt no indignation, only her faithful heart, that had meekly borne insult and wrong at the hands of a

haughty foe, now sank at the thought that all this heavy sacrifice had been in vain,—had won her only shame and suspicion. Nevertheless she had not the heart to cast any blame on Rama, to whom she replied in a tone of fond raillery:—

“ Why did you not, O Rama, tell me frankly that you doubted my faith ? Or if you suspected my virtue, why did you take the trouble to send a messenger with a token to seek me in my prison ? A prison was the fittest abode of one suspected of unfaithful conduct ! Why did you brave the ocean billows and lead your legions to the island of Lanka to rescue from captivity a fallen woman ? Why did you risk your life in countless encounters to recover a sinful woman ? Ah ! my Rama, I was fancy-free until I saw thee, and since I took thy hand in mine, I have ever been a virgin but for thee. I followed thee in thy exiles, and roved with thee from forest to forest, treading the thorny path cheerfully by thy side, and disdaining the bed of roses that lay within my reach both at Ayodhya and at Videha. Women may be frail, as ye men often aver ; but the faith of such a woman is made of such stuff that neither the shocks of chance nor the blows of fate nor yet the wheedling

smiles of pleasure have power to alter it. But perhaps all this talk is vain, since when suspicion lights upon a woman, her pleadings only serve to add to her fancied guilt. Think not, Rama, I speak thus for fear ; I fear nothing worse than shame ; and to save myself from the shame which I now feel to be inevitable, I pray that I may be allowed to immolate myself upon the funeral pyre. Lakshmana, I entreat thee as a brother, if thou lovest me, prepare a pyre, and let me cast myself upon it. It is meet and proper that the child of the Earth should lose her life in Fire."

Rama's face turned white as ashes at these reproachful words. Tears glazed his eyes ; his breast heaved with emotion ; his lips were firmly sealed. But he had proceeded too far to retreat. So he quietly watched, while Lakshmana erected a pile of fagots and lighted it, and Sita stepped boldly upon it, and addressed a short prayer to the God of Fire :—

"If I am true in thought as well as in deed, mayest thou, O God of Fire, save my name from the shame that threatens it ! If a false rumour has clouded the purity of my faith, I pray thee, O God of Fire, to dispel that cloud ! If I have

been false to my lord and husband even for the smallest fraction of a moment, may nothing of me remain as witness of my shame but a heap of pale ashes !”

Soon the flames wrapped round the figure of Sita, and for some moments she completely disappeared from view. The spectators burst into a wail of lamentation when she vanished from sight; but it was not long before a miracle succeeded. The flames died down, and Sita re-appeared in all her former bloom, not a curl upon her head, not a flower upon her brow, not a thread of her garment, even touched by the fire. The spectators were filled with awe, and Rama’s eyes streamed with tears as he ran forward and clasped Sita in a loving embrace, while Sita only buried her face in his bosom and sobbed aloud. Then when the paroxysm of joy had subsided, Rama said :—

“ Never from the day I first beheld the face of Sita did I for a single minute doubt her faith or her love or her truth. Sita’s love has always stood firm and unwavering : it has now passed the severest of tests,—an actual ordeal of fire. Neither the doom of exile, nor the painful privations of forest life, nor the horrors of a prison, nor yet

the threat of death could turn the course of her true love away from the path of faith by even the breadth of a hair. Let the whole world now bear witness of this fact."

Preparations were now made to leave Ceylon. The fourteen years of exile had also ended with the ending of the war. The quickest mode of transit that Rama and his counsellors could think of, was by an aerial car, such as the one that had fallen to the hands of Rama as one of the trophies of conquest. But before leaving Lanka, Rama had to make a disposition of the territories he had won by the rights of war, and this he did by settling the kingdom of Lanka on his faithful all Bibhishana. Bibhishana, however, declined to assume the reins of sovereignty until he had discharged his final duty of escorting Rama to Ayodhya and seeing him installed on his father's throne ; and Sugriva and Hanumana expressed the same wish of waiting upon Rama and accompanying him to his capital, and Rama could not be so ungracious as to decline their request.

And now the aerial car sped on through the air, and as it flew over the spots associated with particular incidents connected with Rama's

wanderings, Rama pointed them out one by one to Sita, just to revive what were now pleasant reminiscences of those localities. The triple peaks of Trikuta were the first objects that met their eyes, standing forth to view like magnified giants. Soon they passed over the causeway by which Rama and his army had crossed over to Ceylon, and in pointing out that structure to Sita, Rama made a prophetic observation on its future name, saying, "Probably coming generations will connect that causeway with my love-adventure, and call it by the inaccurate name of 'Rama's Bridge.' I am glad it has not proved an ass's bridge." Passing onwards they crossed the Kishkindha mountains where Rama slew the warrior Bali and placed the dethroned king, Sugriva, on his rightful throne. Not far from there was the lake of Pampa, by whose wooded margin Rama wept forth his tears of sorrow at the news of Sita's captivity. A little further away they spied the woods of Janasthana, where Jatayu had struggled to intercept Ravana, as the latter was fleeing with Sita, and where that faithful creature had spent his dying breath in giving valuable information as to the way Sita had been taken away. And now they came over

more peaceful regions. At their feet lay in grove on grove, the romantic woodlands of Panchavati, where the royal exiles had lived in quiet tranquillity before their lives were crossed by misfortune. The sight of those happy woods called forth a sigh from the lips of both Rama and Sita, as they were reminded of the blissful shades which had afforded them hospitality so long. Almost next door was the hermitage of saint Agastya, situated by the banks of the sacred Godavari. And now they had come into more central regions, the fauna and flora of which were so familiar to their eyes. For yonder forest was no other than the forest of Dandak, and that low hill dominating the landscape was no other than Chitrakuta, the abode of saint Valmiki. It was there, as Rama reminded his consort, that Bharata and the queens had come to invite the exiles back to Ayodhya, soon after the death of Dasaratha. And now they were within a day's journey of home, if it had been a land journey, for the blue-watered Jamuna was flowing into the ruddy Ganges, and they marked out the spot as holy Prayag, where they had passed a night at the hermitage of Bharadwaja. Thinking it would be both discourteous and disrespectful to

the old *Rishi* not to visit him once more while passing over Prayag, Rama ordered the aerial car to be brought down, and the whole party entered the hermitage of Bharadwaja, where from the lips of the hoary sage they received glad tidings of home for the first time since their migrating into the forest regions of southern India. Word was immediately sent to Bharata who was living at a sort of hermitage built by himself not far from the place; and Bharata came, wearing the garb of an anchorite which he had vowed to wear during the whole term of his brother's exile.

The meeting between the brothers was a most touching scene, and the gray-haired sage himself was sensibly moved at this display of fraternal affection. The rest of the journey to Ayodhya was performed more leisurely, in order to give time to the inhabitants of the capital to prepare a royal reception. A party of Vanars carried the happy intelligence post-haste to Ayodhya, and the rejoicings of the people became uncontrolled. Men, women and children danced for very joy, and in the common merry-making all distinctions of age and rank were wiped away.

When Rama entered the royal palace, his

home, he was led by Bharata to the hall of audience, and there he pointed out to Rama the stately throne of his fathers, on which there rested a pair of sandals. The sandals were the same that Bharata had taken off the feet of Rama at Chitrakuta, when the latter had declined to go back to Ayodhya. "Symbols of thy kingship," said Bharata, pointing to the pair of sandals, "these have filled thy kingly throne during thy absence in field and forest. I hope I have kept thy trust securely and faithfully: take back what is thine now, what was thine from thy very birth, and what will be thine through all the future. And my reward will be the happiness that a loyal subject feels in being ruled by a beneficent king."

The coronation of Rama and Sita as King and Queen of Kosala followed a few days later, and it was a ceremony attended with the most magnificent pomp and splendour. Indian poets are never tired of describing the blessings enjoyed by the people during Rama's reign, and the phrase "Rama rajya" is still a proverb, signifying ideal sovereignty. No epidemics ever visited the land; severe types of illness were also unknown; and men, women and children enjoyed

a measure of health unknown to this sanitary age. As a consequence of this, premature death, the cutting off of promising youths in the prime of life, was also unheard of, and human longevity was at a level from which it has continuously declined, until to-day the average length is far below forty. There were no thieves, no robbers, no swindlers ; neighbours and townsmen lived in mutual amity, and the whole population was loyal and faithful to the king. There was no scarcity, no famine, no drought ; the earth yielded bumper harvests of all the crops grown in the soil. There was no unemployment, no poverty, no destitution, no pauperism ; all were happy in the enjoyment of a moderation and a contentment which was richer than wealth.

